

**Taking back control:
The online political engagement of pro-Leave
non-digital-native Facebook users**

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Abstract

Facebook has frequently been implicated in Britain's 2016 EU referendum result, and support for leaving the EU has been linked to wider right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist movements which have found certain footholds online. However, limited qualitative sociological research has so far been conducted into support for Brexit, let alone its relationship to social media use. In particular, social media research focuses on big-data analysis; the question remains *how* and *why* individuals engage with pro-Leave and related right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist material online. There is also a dearth of research on the political social media use of 'non-digital-natives', the group statistically most likely to support Leave, and on research into Facebook, which is by far Britain's most popular social media platform.

This project sought to understand how Facebook was used by non-digital-native Brexit supporters to engage with pro-Leave and related right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist content, and the significance of this engagement to their social and political lives. In doing so it aimed to shed light on the complex nexus between the recent phenomenon of support for Brexit, long-standing discontents with ethnic and religious diversity and liberal social change, and the evolving role of social media platforms in our political lives. The novel methodology for the study combined multiple semi-structured interviews with a cohort of 15 pro-Leave Facebook users, with one-month-long observations of their Facebook Wall activity. This allowed the study to take an interpretive approach that gave voice to participants' experiences, while simultaneously contextualising these in an immersive, ethnographic fashion.

The findings reveal that the logic of the Facebook platform both afforded and encouraged participants to become politically engaged in ways that made them feel valuable and in control, within a socio-political context that they experienced as devaluing and disempowering. Elements of this logic found to play a role included Facebook's global connectivity, its algorithmically-driven automation, its emphasis on sharing, and its role as an alternative news provider. This combined with the crystallising issue of Brexit to mobilise existing grievances among participants. Participants accounted for their pro-Leave stances by avidly drawing on narrative templates provided by the content in their online milieus, and interpreting them in light of their lived experiences. These narratives cohered around a metanarrative that a global agenda exists that is deliberately facilitating or forcing 'left-wing' social change from above, to the detriment of 'normal' people like 'us'. This metanarrative conceived of power in similar ways to both conspiracy theories and populism, and employed frames of entitlement and demonisation that were culturally racist, nativist and Islamophobic. Finally, contrary to 'post-truth' claims that a shift towards privileging emotions over facts is behind Brexit and other contemporary mediated right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist phenomena, participants were extremely preoccupied with facts and demonstrating factfulness. This was despite their experiences of, and narratives around, social media use also being highly emotive, reflecting the way in which emotions and rationality are not mutually exclusive. Overall, the thesis reveals that behind participants' use of social media was a desire to redefine claims to political knowledge while also reclaiming their own status as valued and empowered citizens, which was experienced as lost within an increasingly cosmopolitan and liberal society.

Declaration

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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1. Introduction to the thesis

In March 2018, *The Observer* and *The Guardian* uncovered accusations that the personal data of millions of Facebook users had been illegally harvested and used to target individuals with political advertising (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). Photographs of the ‘whistle-blower’ were strewn across the front page of British newspapers, as it became clear that a firm called Cambridge Analytica had been employed by Donald Trump’s presidential campaign in the US and the Brexit¹ referendum Leave campaign in the UK, among others globally, to generate psychological profiles of voters for the targeting of specific campaign messaging online. Although the public had long since begun to be aware of the existence of algorithmically-targeted advertising based on recordable online behaviour such as browser history and social media engagement (Debatin et al., 2009; Fuchs, 2012), this was considered more violating as the psychological profiles were calculated using disingenuously gathered personality survey data and the unconsented scraping of Friends² lists and other personal information from the platform, contrary to its Terms of Use and perhaps even with Facebook’s knowledge (Risso, 2018, pp. 77–78; Zuboff, 2019, pp. 277–278). This was a particularly unsettling development in a history of data privacy concerns related to social media (Isaak & Hanna, 2018) also because it linked these with the notion of a new threat to the integrity of electoral politics and democracy.

However, when it came to the role of social media in politics, and particularly in generating support for right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist movements and ideologies, the scandal merely served to confirm concerns that had existed for almost a decade. Since the early 2010s, researchers had been observing that Web 2.0 had grown into a hostile arena for discussion of contentious politics, particularly with regard to race and immigration (e.g. Due, 2011; Hughey, 2012; Hughey & Daniels, 2013; Loke, 2012; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). By 2016 a Time Magazine cover went so far as to proclaim that we are ‘losing the Internet to the culture of hate’ (Stein, 2016). Theories like echo chambers and polarisation were being used in attempts to explain how the increasing visibility of these ideas, combined with algorithmically-driven consumption

¹ Having entered the common vernacular, this term is used throughout the thesis to refer to Britain’s exit from the European Union.

² In this thesis, to avoid confusion, functions of social media platforms are denoted by capitalising the first letter (see below).

of content on social media, was having an effect on politics (e.g. Colleoni et al., 2014; Quattrociochi et al., 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2017). The Cambridge Analytica scandal highlighted the way in which this online political engagement could no longer be understood solely in terms of users, the content they circulated, and their interactions with each other, but rather was part of the profit-driven model of ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff, 2019) in which the monetisation of data now had political implications.

However, popular support for Leave grew long before the referendum campaign and its employment of Cambridge Analytica. Although Euroscepticism was a simmering concern among the British public since the first application for European Community membership, events like the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 saw the issue begin to come to the fore (Gifford, 2006). The most prominent advocates of Britain’s exit from the EU in recent years, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and their long-time leader Nigel Farage, experienced growth in electoral popularity after they embraced right-wing and populist concerns around immigration and dissatisfaction with the political establishment (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, pp. 76–89). Developments like the accession of Poland and Hungary to the EU in 2004 and Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, along with the press’ demonising depictions of immigrants from these countries (Fox et al., 2012) and other nations hoping to join (Ker-Lindsay, 2018), added to the momentum of UKIP’s campaign. In 2014, UKIP won a landslide victory in Britain’s European elections in what were described as the union’s most Eurosceptic elections to date (Treib, 2014), and the party also gained a significant share of the vote in the 2015 General Election (M. J. Goodwin, 2015). By the time the referendum was scheduled and the Leave campaign began, the EU was given as one of the top three important issues facing the nation by 20% of voters, up from just 3% five years earlier (Ipsos MORI, n.d.), and Leave was leading Remain by 1 point in the polls (Dahlgreen, 2016). UKIP’s fraught relationship with the issue of immigration and race over the years – including thinly veiled nativist and Islamophobic statements and policies (Gupta & Virdee, 2018), and scandals among members and leaders (BBC News, 2018a; Stockham, 2015) – also exposed the central role of cultural racism in support for Brexit. This cultural racism was neither new nor fleeting (Barker, 1981; Solomos, 2003; Garner, 2010). That is, the force of Euroscepticism in Britain has in no way been limited to the impact of Leave’s 2016 social media campaign.

Despite the above, the Cambridge Analytica story quickly became a scandal that received much press and even parliamentary attention (Lusher, 2018). The construction of this scandal, it could be said, reflected a broader discourse of illegitimacy of the referendum and US election results by certain media, academic and parliamentary actors, indicating an unease or sense, among Remain supporters, that democracy had gone wrong or had been hijacked. From the announcement of the result until the Cambridge Analytica story broke, ‘populism’, campaign lies and tabloid-propagated racism were the object of analyses that sought to rationalise the result of the referendum (e.g. Pencheva, 2016; Peat, 2017; The Independent, 2018). Now it seemed it had been discovered that social media was to blame. According to this narrative, trust in this new technology over institutions of authority had ‘dr[iven] the British public to emotionally charged, value-based decision making’ (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018, p. 89). Thus, what the fallout of the Cambridge Analytica scandal also draws our attention to is the existence, at least among some commentators, of a discourse of the illegitimacy of the referendum result, based on the assumption that the British public, in its right (unmanipulated) mind, would never have voted to leave the European Union. This attitude towards Leave voters was not without its consequences, which are central to this thesis.

The infamous Leave campaign slogan ‘Take Back Control’ was well-contrived. Its resonance stems from its ability to articulate not only a palpable sense of discontent and disempowerment, but a clear call to action (J. Clarke & Newman, 2017, p. 108). However, at the time of writing, more than four years after the referendum was held, the shape of the economic and geopolitical impacts of this new ‘control’ is still entirely unclear. Meanwhile, the impacts of the referendum on domestic politics have been radical (Gamble, 2018) and unabating, as the 2019 General Election result demonstrated (Cutts et al., 2020). Also crucial are the social impacts. The issue of Brexit is said to have deepened divisions within British society (Lord, 2018) and drawn new lines of affective polarisation between Leavers and Remainers (Hobolt et al., 2020). Since the referendum, there has been an increase in race-related hate crime (BBC News, 2019), with a 41% spike reported immediately after the vote (Forster, 2016).

In the lead-up to and since the referendum, the popularisation of social media has also changed the way a significant proportion of people engage with politics (Wahl-

Jorgensen, 2019). With or without the psychographic targeting strategies of Cambridge Analytica, the success of the Leave campaign at the ballot box has been partly attributed to its messaging on social media (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2017; Lilleker & Bonacci, 2017; Marshall & Drieschova, 2018), where Vote Leave reportedly spent 98% of their funds, including funding nearly a billion targeted adverts (Moore & Ramsay, 2017, p. 166). Pro-Leave messaging is not, however, confined to official campaign material, as political content is also modified, created and circulated by individual social media users and interest groups. On Facebook, Britain's most popular social networking site, dozens of Pages and Groups have emerged specifically around support for Leave, some boasting followings in the hundreds of thousands (B. Lee, 2019). Pro-Leave content has also been produced and Shared by a large number of other right-wing personalities and groups to vast quantities of Followers, from Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg to Britain First and 'Tommy Robinson'³. Furthermore, among older age groups statistically more likely to have voted Leave in the referendum (Ashcroft, 2016), social media use is on the rise (Ofcom, 2017). Thus, while a large amount of research has focused on 'digital natives' and the effects of exposure to digital connectivity on their development (Bennett and Maton, 2010), there is an important case for investigating the social media use of those who have been experiencing the adoption of and adaptation to use of the internet in later life.

Unfortunately, while there has been much public discussion about 'disinformation' online, little is yet known about how individuals actually engage with political content on social media and the effect that this has on their social and political lives. New computational capabilities have seen the emergence of a field of 'social media analysis', but the focus of this analysis is observable content and quantifiable behavioural traces such as Likes or Shares. These represent the material available for users to engage with, and the artefacts of some of their interactions with it. They cannot tell us which content is meaningful to individuals and in what ways, or their motivations for engaging with it. They ignore the social and cultural conditions under which such content and behavioural traces are produced, and limit our understanding of social media use to the data it produces, effectively severing its connection with our 'offline' lives. As Hine

³ Founder of the English Defence League (EDL) and still a prominent right-wing personality after his departure from the group, 'Tommy Robinson' is a pseudonym (Cleland, 2020) and thus appears in inverted commas throughout this thesis.

(2015) argues, we must treat the digital as embedded, embodied, and everyday if we are to research its use in a sociologically meaningful way.

This thesis takes a qualitative, interpretive approach to investigate the relationship between Facebook use and support for Leave. It examines how Facebook was used by ‘non-digital-native’ Brexit supporters to engage with pro-Leave and related right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist content, and the significance of this engagement to their social and political lives. In particular, four research questions drive the enquiry:

- 1) How and why do non-digital-native pro-Leave Facebook users in England and Wales use social media to engage with politics?
- 2) How does this group’s social media use affect their political engagement?
- 3) How do these individuals make sense of their pro-Leave position online and offline?
- 4) What is the significance of truth claims and affect to these individuals’ political engagement?

These questions are approached through a multiple methods research design with a group of participants, combining interviews with overt immersive online observations. Based on inductive analysis of the data, the thesis argues that behind participants’ use of social media was a desire to redefine claims to political knowledge while also reclaiming their own status as valued and empowered citizens, which was experienced as lost within an increasingly cosmopolitan and liberal society. It develops this argument through discussion of three related aspects of participants’ online political engagement: their online practices, their narratives, and their attitudes towards knowledge.

The thesis begins by critically reviewing the available literature in the field of political social media use and support for Brexit. The review demonstrates that as yet researchers have limited empirical understanding of support for Brexit beyond quantitative survey results that link it to immigration (e.g. Ashcroft, 2016; M. Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017), and class-based qualitative work that argues the opposite (e.g. McKenzie, 2017a; Walkerdine, 2020). Furthermore, research into the relationship between social media and Brexit has focused on the Twitter platform and has been limited to analysis of

content and behavioural traces (e.g. Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Gorodnichenko et al., 2018; Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2017), while close-up research that seeks to understand the role of social media in support for Brexit is lacking. Having established this research gap, the third chapter of the thesis outlines the method of the current study, which I devised to fit the interpretivist epistemology of the project. I also discuss ethical considerations in the design and conduct of the research, and explain the ethical and methodological decisions taken.

The empirical enquiry of the thesis begins in Chapter 4 by outlining how the participants became engaged on social media and subsequently used it to find and Share political information and content. I discuss the finding that participants' intense online political engagements represented new practices but not necessarily new political stances, and argue that the logic of the Facebook platform both afforded and encouraged participants to become politically engaged in ways that made them feel socially valued and gave them a sense of control. Within a socio-political context that they experienced as devaluing and disempowering, elements of Facebook's logic, including its global connectivity, its algorithmically-driven automation, its emphasis on sharing and role as an alternative news provider, provided new opportunities for participants to experience agency, and affected the ways in which they did so.

Chapter 5 continues the empirical analysis by turning to the content of participants' narratives, in particular those narratives that they employed to account for their pro-Leave stances. Each of the salient narratives drawn on by participants is discussed, including their narratives about the EU, about immigration, and about 'left-wing' villains and social change. The analysis demonstrates how these narratives cohered around a metanarrative about control, namely that there exists a global agenda that is deliberately facilitating or forcing 'left-wing' change from above, to the detriment of 'normal' people like 'us'. This metanarrative conceived of power in similar ways to conspiracy theories and populism, and employed frames of entitlement and demonisation that were culturally racist, nativist and Islamophobic.

The final empirical chapter, Chapter 6, interrogates the 'post-truth' claim that right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist political developments like Brexit are reflective of a shift towards privileging emotions over facts in mediated politics. Based on participants' narratives and the Facebook content they Shared, I argue that knowledge

was in fact highly valued by participants and was central to the ways they spoke about politics, as they sought to subvert what they saw as the dominant regime of truth and redefine where the power to determine the truth lay. This engagement with truth and facts was, however, a highly affective experience, and emotions like anger, pride and humour played a significant role. This reflects the way in which emotions and rationality are not mutually exclusive, and cautions against sweeping and normative generalisations regarding the existence of a paradigm shift from one to the other.

The scope of the thesis is limited to users in England and Wales because a majority in each of these nations voted to Leave in the referendum, in contrast with Scotland and Northern Ireland which had Remain majorities (R. Harris & Charlton, 2016). Extending the scope to include Leavers from the latter two nations would have meant introducing quite different sociohistorical contexts of nationalism, as well as more contentious relationships with Westminster government and thus potentially quite different political issues and engagements (Henderson et al., 2016, 2017).

It is also important to note that, due to methodological constraints outlined in Chapter 3, the scope of the thesis and its conclusions are limited to a group of participants who were mostly very actively engaged in Publicly Sharing pro-Leave content on Facebook. As has been recently reported, it is only a relatively vocal minority of individuals in Britain who engage in such contentious political comment on social media (Savage, 2020), let alone who dedicate so much time to it. In this sense, these participants were neither typical Brexiteers nor typical Brexiteers on Facebook. At the same time, they were generally neither extremists in terms of their worldviews nor radical in terms of their lived experiences. Observations about their practices, narratives and attitudes towards information and information seeking, although not necessarily generalisable, offer important insights into the potential for Facebook to politically engage users around contentious topics and the implications of this.

This thesis adopts the term ‘non-digital-natives’ to refer to those who did not grow up with the internet, broadly defined as those whose birth year fell before 1980 (based on a common definition of ‘digital natives’ as having been born after this time (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008)). The use of this term is not intended to homogenise the relationship with technology of a whole generation of users or to legitimate a ‘moral panic’ over the effects that this technology may have on young people (S. Bennett et al., 2008). It is

used solely to acknowledge the potentially distinct experience of those who have adopted digital connectivity only in adulthood. This experience is significant not as an issue of media literacy (about which it would be neither fair nor accurate to make assumptions based on age) but as part of a broader experience of this age group adapting to a rapidly changing world. Although the term ‘digital immigrant’ has been used (Bayne & Ross, 2011), this risks causing confusion, not least because much of the content of the ideologies being discussed in this thesis concerns immigrants and immigration. This group of users have not ‘migrated’ from an analogue world to a digital one, but rather have incorporated and learned to use various technologies later in life. The distinction between their experience and that of digital natives is more akin to the difference between adult language learning and childhood language acquisition, where children grow up as ‘native’ speakers of a language.

I use the concept of ‘political engagement’ following Berger (2009, p. 336) to refer to participants’ ‘attention to and activity in political issues and processes’, in this case, the issue of Brexit and related right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics. Berger differentiates between ‘engagement as a particular action’ and ‘engagement as a generalised condition’. The former can refer to being ‘engaged in’ something (active, but not necessarily attentive), ‘engaged by’ something (attentive or interested, but not necessarily active), or ‘engaged with’ something (both attentive and active). The latter, on the other hand, can refer only to being ‘engaged with’, as a state of political engagement necessitates ‘attentive activity’ aimed at affecting government action, either directly or indirectly. As will become clear, participants were in many cases engaged *with* Brexit and surrounding issues on Facebook, in that they were engaged (or affected) *by* the content they encountered and its inherent ideologies, but also actively engaged *in* sharing this content, with the conscious intention of spreading awareness in the hope of effecting change.

As alluded to above, support for Brexit has been associated with the full spectrum of conservative, nativist, racist and far-right ideologies and groups (as well as with some left-wing ones (Mason, 2016; Worth, 2017)). Accordingly, such ideologies and groups feature heavily throughout the project data and the analysis presented in this thesis. There is no clear academic consensus on the use of terms such as ‘far-right’, ‘extreme-right’, ‘radical right’, ‘radical populist’, ‘right-wing populist’ etc. (Mudde, 2019, p. 6),

and no catch-all term is sufficient to encompass the spectrum dealt with here without misrepresenting some of its elements. As Mudde (ibid, p. 5) notes, choice of terminology is not a trivial matter in this arena as these definitions are also used to set the limits of social, democratic and legal acceptability. Choosing the term that individuals or groups use to describe themselves is one strategy towards avoiding misrepresentation and coheres with an interpretivist epistemology, but this relies on an articulated (and consistent) self-awareness by each of these, something which is not necessarily characteristic of the disparate milieus and fluid participation of individuals online. In this thesis, I thus do not use a single term as a shorthand for a presumed fixed set of opinions or values bound by an ideological border, but refer, where possible, to specific attitudes or behaviours as they are encountered, whether that be for example conservatism, opposition to immigration, or (cultural) racism. However, there are occasions when a broader term is required to signal the interlinked nature of these ideologies and movements in global political life today, or refer to the growing body of literature that deals with these. In such cases, I use the adjective ‘right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist’. Here, ‘right’ refers to ideological positioning on socio-cultural issues and policies, rather than socio-economic ones, to reflect the shifting meaning of this distinction in contemporary politics (ibid, p. 7). The term is intended to encompass everything from conservative views towards social change and culturally and ethnically diverse modes of national belonging, to white supremacist and extreme authoritarian attitudes. This is because in the context of Brexit, where over half of those who turned out at the referendum supported Leave, although radical and extreme forms of right-wing ideology are not immaterial, they are not characteristic of all of the relevant views and attitudes dealt with here. The inclusion of the term ‘nativist’ in this terminology simultaneously intends to acknowledge the importance of attitudes towards immigration and ethnic/cultural diversity in the contemporary context.

In this thesis, ‘social media’ refers to dynamic, deinstitutionalised platforms where primarily (but not exclusively) ordinary individuals are responsible for generating and disseminating content, and two-way interaction with the audience is facilitated (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2013). This includes a wide range of platforms, such as blogs, microblogs, content sharing sites, discussion forums, virtual communities, bookmarking sites, online review sites, and social networking sites (Stoycheff et al., 2017). Facebook belongs to the latter; it is a platform for users to create personal

Profiles, make their connections known to others, and interact with content, and there is an emphasis on interpersonal communication (Stoycheff et al., 2017). Of course, this is an uncritical definition. It is important to note that despite the superficial focus on user-centrism, social media exist within an evolving data-driven economy and business model, which is sustained through targeted advertising that ‘rel[ies] on unsettledness to captivate attention and encourage active, quantifiable engagement, which is then employed to produce (and sell) predictability’ (Lupinacci, 2020, p. 2). On a social level, it is worth noting that they are part of the production of new and distinct forms of social coordination ‘by relying on different configurations of the interplay between real-time connectivity and sociality’ (ibid). In this thesis, to avoid confusion, the various functions and features of the Facebook platform, such as Share, Like, Wall, or Newsfeed, are denoted by capitalising the first letter of the word. These terms are explained in a technical glossary in Appendix 1.

Finally, the interpretive approach of this thesis that seeks to give voice to and understand participants and their meaning-making on their own terms is not intended to condone or legitimise the positions and attitudes they express. Doing so would risk disregarding the history of racialisation and racial discrimination experienced by many of the groups who are targeted by these attitudes. The thesis does seek, however, to understand and engage with the experiences of participants in so much as they are real to them. Whether or not participants’ sense of marginalisation reflected a reality of oppression is not the question here, but this felt oppression, as the thesis demonstrates, is real in its outcomes. As Pilkington (2016, pp. 33–34) argues, social relations are complex, and the perpetuation of oppression by particular groups does not preclude the potential for their own oppression. Each form of oppression is worthy of study, and this is even more the case if its outcomes include harm to other groups. Furthermore, oversimplification of the issue of Leave support into a binary whereby ‘either Brexit people are racists or they are decent people who have suffered (...) is analytically unsustainable and politically unhelpful’ (J. Clarke & Newman, 2017, p. 109) as it collapses the complexity of social relations and denies the plurality and fluidity of the identities, values and attitudes people hold, which can be at times internally incompatible or even contradictory. The thesis hopes to shed light on this complexity, as it elucidates the elaborate nexus between the contemporary phenomenon of

Euroscepticism, long-standing discontent with immigration and social change, and the evolving role of social media in politics.

2. Brexit and political social media use: Mapping the theoretical landscape

2.1 Introduction

Given the objectives and research questions outlined in Chapter 1, this chapter reviews existing literature about the way social media use is shaping the contemporary political landscape, in particular its role in right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics, and support for Brexit. I begin by outlining the major theoretical developments in understanding and explaining the effect that social media has had on political engagement, including theories of disinhibition, echo chambers and online polarisation, before discussing ‘social media logic’ (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) as a way to conceptualise the role of social media in political life, and the political implications of the affective nature of social media. The second section of the chapter turns to online right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics, examining recent theories about the relationship between social media and ‘populism’, disinformation and the ‘post-truth’ condition. The relationship between these issues and Brexit is then discussed, and I establish the importance of discontent and a sense of disenfranchisement to ‘populist’ support for Leave, before outlining the significance of opposition to immigration – and in particular Muslim immigration – to this support. Finally, I review existing studies into support for Brexit on social media, and demonstrate that the social sciences have yet to adequately conceptualise the political engagement of pro-Leave Facebook users, and that this is particularly attributable to a lack of participant-focused or ‘close-up’ enquiry which asks users what this online political engagement means to them.

2.2 Changing political socialities in the social media age

Social media technologies have become increasingly popular; as Hine asserts, these digital platforms are not asocial arenas separate from embodied life, but rather are embedded in the ‘offline’ lived reality of users (Hine, 2015, p. 32). Thus, their use has real consequences for our social and political lives and vice versa. In recent years, social scientists have noted that these platforms may be changing the way a significant proportion of people engage with politics (Bode et al., 2014; Boulianne, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). This section examines influential theories about the effect that social

media has had on political engagement, particularly around polarisation, before looking at ways to conceptualise the specific architectural elements behind this.

2.2.1 Disinhibition, echo chambers and polarisation

Following techno-optimist predictions that the advent of the interactive ‘Web 2.0’ would engender a kind of democratic public sphere online (e.g. Earl & Kimport, 2011; Hacker & Dijk, 2000; Shirky, 2008), a substantial body of research has focused on the positive political effects of social media, such as its potential advantages for activism (Castells, 2015; George & Leidner, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2012; Marichal, 2013; Mutsvairo, 2016; Rambukanna, 2015; Vie, 2014) and for political participation (e.g. Casteltrione, 2015; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Momeni, 2017; Mossberger et al., 2008; Olsson, 2016). At the same time, in more pessimistic works, terms like ‘clicktivism’ and ‘slacktivism’ were developed to refer dismissively to low-risk, low-effort online political activities such as Sharing or Liking political content or signing online petitions (Halupka, 2014). It was pointed out that these may or may not translate into committed political attitudes or offline political engagement (Y.-H. Lee & Hsieh, 2013; Lim, 2013; McCafferty, 2011; Rotman et al., 2011).

In addition to this potential for positive political impact, social media research has also investigated its negative effects, including not just how our social media use affects politics but how political social media use affects users. There has been a popular assumption that an ‘online disinhibition effect’ (Suler, 2005), the product of anonymity and asynchronicity in online communication, makes political talk online less civil and more discriminatory, contributing to a dangerous rise in hate speech in online discourse. However, unlike message board-style sites or Comments on online news stories out of which this theory grew, anonymity is not the norm on contemporary social media platforms. Thus, as Titley (2014, p. 19) asserts, ‘it is not clear that the licence of anonymity is the central issue when it comes to hate speech’. Despite having been proposed before the popularisation of social media (and having been subject to limited empirical scrutiny), Suler’s theory continues to be cited and mis-cited in analyses that perpetuate the popular idea that anonymity is a defining factor in the production of ‘online hate speech’ today (e.g. Berg, 2016; Farrington et al., 2017; Golbeck, 2014; Keum, 2016; Pierre, 2016; Rohlfing & Sonnenberg, 2016; Santana, 2014). The disinhibition hypothesis also assumes that emotions like anger or hate pre-exist within

individual bodies, waiting to be released when our inhibitions are low, which runs contrary to the relational conceptualisation of emotions and communicational norms broadly accepted within sociology (Burkitt, 1997; Malmqvist, 2015). A relational approach is particularly crucial when it comes to Facebook, given that this platform ‘specializes in strong ties’ (Valenzuela et al., 2018, p. 117), meaning users tend to use it to connect with those with whom they have an existing social relation rather than with strangers.

Moving beyond such arguments about rises in ‘hateful’ speech online, recent research has focused on the potentially ‘polarising’ effect of social media. Of course, the internet provides boundless avenues for seeking out likeminded individuals and agreeable content, along with the opportunity to interact with these, which could be assumed to play a major role in reinforcing and legitimating ‘distasteful’ views (Blank & Lutz, 2018). However, the concept of ‘echo chambers’ has arisen to describe the unique way in which social media allows users to interact exclusively with individuals and views with which they already agree, reinforcing views while shielding us from alternative arguments (Flaxman et al., 2016; Garrett, 2009; Quattrociocchi et al., 2016).

There is, however, conflicting evidence as to whether such echo chambers actually do exist to a significant extent on social media and whether they indeed function to increase ideological polarisation (Wollebæk et al., 2019). For instance, while some studies have found the existence of echo chambers in insular political threads or communities such as anti-vaccination communities (Van Raemdonck, 2019), other studies have found that such effects depend on dispositional and topic related factors (Barberá et al., 2015; Dubois & Blank, 2018), and that it is primarily those users who are more extreme in their ideologies who interact less with opposing views (J. Bright, 2017). Still further studies find that social media users do in fact actively seek out these opposing viewpoints – albeit that this may be for the purpose of seeking confrontation (Karlsen et al., 2017) – and this may itself contribute to polarisation by promoting defensive reactions and strengthening in-group resolve (Bail et al., 2018; Hwang et al., 2014, 2018; Kim & Kim, 2019; Rösner et al., 2016; Wang & Silva, 2018). Flaxman et al. (2016) for instance found that when it comes to news consumption, the use of social media and search engines was associated *both* with increased ideological distance between individuals *and* with exposure to opposing material. Such findings point to the

limitations of quantitative ‘big data’ or experimental methodologies when it comes to understanding this phenomenon, as generalisations about aggregate effects of social media usage patterns obscure the complex dynamics that contribute to how and why users interact with information, ideas and ideologies online.

2.2.2 Affordances and beyond: social media logic

Indeed, there may be aspects other than homophily that contribute to the political outcomes of our interactions on social media platforms. The ‘affordances’ of social media, or the ‘possibilities and limits for interaction and connectivity’ on these platforms as determined by their architectures, clearly have the power to shape our behaviour there (Boyd, 2011; Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Kalsnes et al., 2017 np; Valenzuela et al., 2018). For instance, Kalsnes et al. (2017) identify the ‘connected affordances’ that correspond to the three types of user practices on Twitter and Facebook – *redistribution* (e.g. Sharing, Retweeting), *interacting* (e.g. Commenting) and *acknowledging* (e.g. Liking) – and use these categories to compare users’ interactions with politicians on the two platforms.

However, the framework of affordances has been criticised for being overly techno-deterministic and for closing down debates about how individuals utilise technologies, the significance of individual motivations, and the way in which affordances are collectively constructed between social and technical realms (Pentzold & Bischof, 2019). Furthermore, social media platforms do not only allow or disallow certain types of behaviour, but can also serve to encourage them, as shown by empirical studies into social media cultures and use (e.g. I. Goodwin et al., 2016; Papacharissi, 2009). As van Dijck (2013, pp. 46–47) contends, Facebook ‘direct(s) users to share information with other users through purposefully designed interfaces’, and Marichal (2016, pp. 7–8) draws on Thaler and Sunstein (2008) to describe this as a kind of ‘nudge’ that encourages expressivity by users. This has even had an effect on the broader social media ecosystem. Due to its leading position, ‘Facebook’s ideology of sharing pretty much set the standard for other platforms’, steering social and cultural norms (and subsequently legal values) around privacy (van Dijck, 2013, p. 46) to the advantage of its user-generated-data driven business model (Marichal, 2016, p. 7).

Given this, van Dijck and Poell (2013) expand on the idea of ‘affordances’ to identify ‘social media logic’. Based on the way in which ‘mass media logic’ has played a determining role in how traditional media operate and their effect on society, they define social media logic as ‘the strategies, mechanisms, and economies underpinning these platforms’ dynamics’ (ibid, p. 3). The concept acknowledges the way in which social media platforms shape as well as facilitate the performances of social acts (van Dijck, 2013, p. 29) by ‘steer[ing] users to specific behaviors, such as liking, commenting or sharing content’ (Kalsnes et al., 2017, np), as well as the organisational and profit-driven reasons behind this. In van Dijck and Poell’s definition, ‘social media logic’ consists of four elements: *programmability*, *popularity*, *connectivity* and *datafication*. This logic, like mass media logic, is of crucial importance to society, they contend, as it has the power to appear as a neutral ‘common sense rationality’ and be exported outside of the media to affect social relations and public life. This includes not only informal interactions, but institutional structures and professional routines (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Of course the logic itself is shaped by corporate and political interests, and forms part of the ideology of surveillance capitalism which has begun to permeate almost every aspect of our lives (Zuboff, 2019).

The framework of social media logic has been adopted by a number of studies into the role of social media in social and political interaction (e.g. Costa, 2018; Duffy & Pooley, 2017; Enli & Simonsen, 2018; Kalsnes et al., 2017; Verdegem & D’heer, 2018; Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2017). Yet, the rapidly changing nature of these platforms and their functionalities arguably requires its elements to be constantly revisited. Missing from the framework, for instance, is ‘the promise of liveness [that] underlies social media’s claims and functionalities more generally’, and which creates both positive experiences like excitement and reassurance, and negative ones like anxiety, fatigue and responsibility (Lupinacci, 2020, p. 6). Duguay (2018), building on the four elements that van Dijck and Poell identified, proposed adding a fifth element: automation. On Facebook and other social media, algorithms use information on user preferences – predicted and categorised based on for example what types of content they (and their Friends) have Liked, Followed or otherwise interacted with – to automatically rank content and determine whether, and in which order, it is displayed in that individual’s Newsfeed (van Dijck, 2013, p. 49).

Social scientists have begun to recognise the ‘social power of algorithms’ (Beer, 2017). For instance, Thorson et al. (2019, p. 2) demonstrated in their study how ‘this algorithmic “sorting out” of users has consequences for who is exposed to news and politics on Facebook’. Such analyses are in-line with concerns over ‘filter bubbles’, a term coined by Sunstein (2018) to describe the way in which personalised content intended to show us more of what we ‘like’ systematically exposes users more to views that reinforce their own, potentially contributing to the kind of polarisation problematised above (see also Polonski, 2016). As Bucher (2017) has noted, differing levels of awareness of the power of algorithms raise questions about how such awareness may be affecting the way in which social media platforms are used. Popularly imagined as unbiased (DeVito, 2017, p. 756; Duguay, 2018), social media algorithms have what Gillespie (2014, p. 181) has described as ‘a technologically inflected promise of mechanical neutrality’. Duguay (2018, p. 22) attributes this to the way in which ‘through the logic of automation, social media platforms position themselves as neutral conduits of news information’.

In addition to automation, scholars have focussed on the connectivity embedded within social media logic. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) described a ‘logic of connective action’ and identified two aspects of personalised digital communication that enable large-scale connective action: political content in the form of easily personalised ideas, and the variety of personal communication technologies now available for sharing these themes. However, it is also the circulation and constant recontextualisation of this content that characterises users’ engagement with it. Horsti (2017), in her examination of the viral circulation of an image on Swedish social media, describes a ‘participatory network culture’ (ibid, p. 1445), in which ‘mediated circulation through networks has become the dominant cultural logic that shapes social relations today’ (ibid, p. 1447). She argues that at the centre of communication are the consumer-public’s desires, and that these active consumers ‘recontextualize, change, and add meanings’ to the images and text they circulate (ibid, p. 1446). In her study, transforming, recontextualising and sharing the image in question was a process by which users constituted their individual identities as well as their relationships to others, including a sense of white Swedish victimhood that posited itself as requiring protection from both Islam and liberal feminism (ibid, p. 1440). She emphasises the interrelationship between the affordances of digital technology that have allowed such material to spread, and the broader societal

conditions under which this takes place, arguing that the virality of the image was possible ‘exactly because it fits to the ideological work of Islamophobia that has been in the making for centuries’ (ibid, p. 1443).

Thus, social media platforms, and the socialities that surround them, facilitate the formation of collective identities as well as the collective construction of communicative norms through the contribution and modification of content. For instance, ‘alt-right’ online spaces (which are discussed in detail in 2.3.2) are characterised by a culture of cynicism that has arisen among this group (Nagle, 2017). Malmqvist (2015) also demonstrated this point in his discourse analysis of racist humour on the Swedish discussion platform ‘Flashback’. In this study, users’ laughing and unlaughing responses to satire worked to subtly but collectively construct and maintain norms around humour, sometimes imposing constraints on what was considered acceptable. Humour here was ‘part of interactional processes of accomplishing affective-discursive order’ within a ‘humour community’ with its own ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1983) around what is appropriate to laugh at and what is not, while simultaneously serving to draw boundaries of belonging by ridiculing immigrants. Similarly, Hakoköngäs et al. (2020) analysing memes shared in Finnish far-right groups on Facebook, found that these memes were used to construct an imagined past. On social media, the term meme generally refers to content such as images, videos or animations, generated and shared by users (ibid, p. 2). These are ‘aggregate texts, collectively created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants’ (Milner, 2016, p. 2). While memes can be used to build positive minority identity (Gal et al., 2016), they have also been one of the primary tools of the ‘alt-right’ (see 2.3.2) and European far-right groups (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019; DeCook, 2018; Miller-Idriss, 2019). In Hakoköngäs and colleagues’ (2020) study, the visual nature of the memes made them useful tools for sharing anti-refugee arguments in a concise form as well as for arousing moral anger and hate and imploring users to action against this group. This also demonstrates how the multi-modal and highly visual nature of social media platforms like Facebook make them powerful tools for engaging users with political content, and this affective power is discussed in the following section.

2.2.3 Social media and affect

Given that ‘emotional expression [is] a key building block of mediated politics’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 1), the emotional and affective nature of social media is key to understanding political engagement there. Wetherell (2012) defines *affect* broadly as ‘embodied meaning-making’, and following this Papacharissi (2015, p. 15) understands *emotion* as ‘subsumed within affect, and perhaps the most intense part of affect’, that is, ‘feelings’, such as ‘anger’, ‘fear’ and ‘sadness’ (although such terms and their embodied experience are both relational and socioculturally-informed (Burkitt, 1997)). Affect is understood as circulatory (Wetherell, 2012, p. 141), part of ‘affective-discursive loops’ (ibid, p. 7). Furthermore, ‘[e]motions are both imbued with meaning *by*, and invest meaning *in*, the contexts where they appear and are solicited’ and are significant to politics partly because ‘[t]hey are integral to our accounts of ourselves and our surroundings, helping to form the “deep stories” (Hochschild, 2016) through which we make sense of everything that happens around us’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 168).

Like political engagement, the architectures of social media platforms shape the circulation of emotion (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 166). Because it is Facebook’s logic that determines how content is presented and engaged with, ‘Intent, agency, and affect thereby become to some extent contingent outcomes of the network itself rather than of human agency alone’ (Hillis et al., 2015, p. 2). The architecture of the platform means that particular forms of emotional expression are structurally encouraged (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, pp. 150–151). For instance, the practice of Liking results in the privileging of content ‘with a high degree of emotional value’ (van Dijck, 2013, p. 65). One of the key aspects of social media that makes it particularly conducive to conveying and provoking emotion is its multi-modal nature. This visuality is endemic to the ‘economies of attention’ of which social media are a key part, and where provoking an emotional response from a user is more likely to generate ‘clicks’ (Cosentino, 2020, p. 21; Kalpokas, 2019, p. 5). Along with images, videos can also be embedded into a Facebook Post such that they can be viewed by other users without clicking away from the page, and the default setting is for videos in one’s Newsfeed to play automatically. Videos can even be recorded directly through the app, in real-time using the ‘Facebook Live’ function.

The real power of online videos is in their ability to use a combination of visual and oral stimulus to emotionally position the audience. McDonald (2018, p. 70), in analysing radicalisation on and through social media, draws our focus to this power as he dissects the videos of preacher Omar Diaby. He points to the narrative style of the videos, which ‘follow the style of a Hollywood epic’ and use ‘intense’ musical soundtracks and dark aesthetics:

Diaby’s videos do not work at the level of intellectual propositions. Instead, they create a mood of foreboding and increasing tension, one where the observers discover themselves trapped in a pervasive conspiracy of false reality. What counts in these videos is their sensory structure, based on the tension between anxiety and release, with discovery serving to link the two. (ibid, p. 71)

But social media are not simply vessels for emotionally provocative content. They have become a ‘key site for the enactment of increasingly embodied politics’ (Overell & Nicholls, 2019b, p. 2), or what McDonald (2018, p. 15) calls ‘a continuous flow of affect’ where emotional self-expression is encouraged (see also Waterloo et al., 2018, p. 1815). In this sense, the emotional power of social media is not limited to their sensory nature, but is also derived from the connectivity they promote. Given the above-described relational understanding of emotions, we can see how networked platforms like social media can be important arenas for sharing and experiencing emotionality. Humour is one example of this, as highlighted above in Malmqvist’s (2015) study. Another example is empathy, and as McDonald (2018, p. 52) highlights, ‘distant suffering’ is something we are increasingly expected to experience and respond to through (online) media. ‘Cultivating compassion or feeling *with* others’ is an important source of the power of mediated storytelling, and social media is no exception (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 169 emphasis in original).

Papacharissi coined the term ‘affective public’ to refer to ‘networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment’ online (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 125). In particular, she focuses on how expression and participation online enables users to feel empowered because of a sense that their views matter. Based on three case studies on Twitter (the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, and the platform’s trending topics function), Papacharissi argues that the storytelling

practices of social media facilitate *feelings* of engagement and reenergise users politically. This focus on storytelling is in line with other research that has emphasised the narrativity of social media platforms (Page, 2018; Venditti et al., 2017, p. S274). Papacharissi draws on Raymond Williams' (1961) concept 'structures of feeling' to describe the collaborative discourses that arise around hashtags on Twitter, including virally circulated memes, 'comprising an organically developed pattern of impulses, restraints, and tonality' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 116). These 'soft structures of feeling', she argues, give rise to 'modalities of engagement' that 'support liminal or transient public spheres that function as affect worlds' (ibid, p. 117). Importantly, in her case studies it was through 'semantic means' that users sought to 'define the personal as political and lay claim to agency', and, she claims, herein lies the politically empowering nature of social media (ibid, p. 132).

However, Papacharissi's arguments are predicated on the logic of the Twitter platform specifically, one which organises and presents related content through the functionality of Hashtags and 'Trending Topic' algorithms. Whether or not a similar mechanism is at work on Facebook has yet to be adequately explored (S. H. Lee & Lim, 2019; cf. Lokot, 2018; Rantasila, 2017). Furthermore, the focus of 'affective publics' is on how activist publics are constructed discursively online, based on analysis of this discourse. It is difficult to establish the veracity of such a conception of political meaning-making without speaking to those who have contributed to these discussions online about how this actually affected them. Moving away from the broader political use of social media, the next section of this chapter focuses on the significance of social media to right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics.

2.3 Social media and contemporary right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics

Much of the above-mentioned discussions around the polarising or echo chamber effects of social media arose out of a particular concern about the prominence of racist and other hateful material online, and the growing popularity of right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist leaders and parties globally. Growing visibility of such content is often linked to the mainstreaming of 'far-right' ideology (Winter, 2019). Right-wing populist political actors (alongside of course less frequently problematised left-wing

populist actors (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2018)) have deliberately employed social media technology in attempts to increase support for their campaigns, including by covert or unethical means (Golovchenko et al., 2020; Risso, 2018; Schroeder, 2019). This section examines a number of aspects of right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist mobilisations online that have been the focus of research in recent years.

2.3.1 Social media and populism

In line with a rise in scholarly interest in ‘populism’⁴ since the Leave vote and the way in which social media has been implicated in this, a number of scholars have begun to argue that social media platforms may be particularly conducive to the spread of populism. For instance, Gerbaudo (2018) has argued that there is an affinity between social media and populism, as the mass networking capabilities provided by social media are apposite means for the mass appeal to ‘the people’ that is one of the primary features of populism. Social media provides a ‘direct’ link to the people, and as connective action based on ‘personal action frames’ (W. L. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), these platforms allow the fragmented and chameleonic ideology of populism to thrive (Engesser et al., 2017). Similarly, Bobba (2019, pp. 20–21) has argued that ‘[p]opulism on social media has benefited from the peculiarities of those media – disintermediation, immediacy and interactivity – to spread its message and strengthen the bond with supporters and sympathisers’. In particular, social media can enable the focus on the charismatic leader that is an essential component of populism, through personalised social media Pages and accounts that provide the illusion that messages are coming directly from the leaders themselves (Bobba, 2019, p. 21; Krämer, 2017, p. 1298).

In addition to this functional advantage, Gerbaudo (2018, p. 745) also attests that the ‘rebellious narrative that has come to be associated with social media’ and the way in which they are seen as a ‘voice for the underdog and unrepresented in opposition to mainstream news media’ (ibid, p. 748) make them a good fit for populism’s anti-establishment creed. In this sense, social media are not just strategically beneficial for populist actors as a means of circumventing mainstream news values to provide unfiltered messages directly to the public (Krämer, 2017, p. 1303), and making these messages more sensational and personal (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1113). Their use also

⁴ The definition of this term and its relationship with Brexit is addressed in 2.4.2.

serves as a message in itself; one of criticism of, and defiance towards, the elitist traditional media (Krämer, 2017). In line with populism's promise to directly represent the will of the virtuous 'people' (Rooduijn, 2019), the internet and social media may seem to embody an 'egalitarian informal mass democracy' (Gerbaudo, 2015; in Krämer, 2017, pp. 1298–1299), albeit this would appear difficult to reconcile with 'exclusionary' forms of populism dominant in Europe (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Importantly, the 'voting system' embedded in social media's architecture (i.e. quantification of Likes etc.) is congruent with the plebiscitary views of populism, and thus the ubiquity of social media within society could serve to further this aspect of populist values (Gerbaudo, 2015, pp. 56–57).

The logic of social media, including their emphasis on anecdotal evidence, conventional wisdom and emotional narrative, have also been said to be in line with the 'populist appreciation of common sense' (Krämer, 2017, p. 1299) and conducive to the 'emotionalist blame attribution' so favoured by right-wing populist political actors (Bobba, 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017). Krämer (2017) also pointed to the ability on social media to interpret any emergent event or issue within a populist frame, and Muis et al (2019, p. 10) termed this 'combination of technologically enabled decontextualization, selectively-picking, and subsequent framing' 'information bricolage'.

However, these studies have generally focused on the advantages of social media for populist political actors, such as parties or individual politicians, and not individual engagement with such technologies and its effects. Krämer (2017) is one researcher who has highlighted how social media could provide an environment for the socialisation of users into 'populist ideology'. After being selectively exposed to populist content through algorithmic filtering (ibid, p. 1304), individuals encounter populist concepts and populist interpretations of social phenomena. The affordances of social media platforms then allow them to express a 'right-wing populist' identity by adopting the corresponding symbols and aesthetics (ibid, p. 1302). The visibility of these identities also lend legitimacy and attractiveness to the movement, which aids its dissemination (ibid, p. 1303). The platforms provide an opportunity to 'explore others' reaction to one's identity and have it confirmed in interactions, including hostile reactions that confirm one's status as a critical outsider' (ibid, p. 1302). Of course, with

social media facilitating practically unlimited global connectivity, the capacity to recruit and socialise individuals into political ideology is geographically boundless. It is this transnational dimension that I turn to next.

2.3.2 Transnational anti-publics and the alt-right

Right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist mobilisation has been described as increasingly transnational thanks to its growing reliance on globally-connected internet and social media technologies (Caiani & Kröll, 2015; Froio & Ganesh, 2019). This is not limited to the ability to disseminate ideas internationally but includes the potential formation of a transnational right-wing ideology or solidarity. As Caiani and Kröll (2015) have found, far-right organisations take an interest in international issues and use the internet to build a transnational online community. A study by Froio and Ganesh (2019) of far-right discourse on Twitter concluded that the frame of Islam as civilisational threat, along with the frame of a nativist approach to the economy, were the two main transnational unifying factors in Western Europe (including the UK). Such a frame is described by Brubaker (2017a) as a ‘civilisational Islamophobia’, related to a pan-European liberal ‘Christianist’ consciousness. Similarly, Hafez (2014) argues that it is Islamophobia, as a form of ‘acceptable’ racism, that allows far-right and right-wing populist actors in Europe to connect with similar actors in the US.

Using the Facebook Pages of Australian far-right groups as a case study, Davis (2019) identifies the existence of a transnational far-right ‘anti-public’. He argues that race-based nationalism alone is insufficient to explain recent developments in ‘extremist discourse’, which has not only proliferated in volume but also shifted in nature since the advent of online media, becoming both transnational and intersectional. His use of the term ‘anti-public’ is intended to reflect the opposition of these groups to liberal democratic principles that underpin the idea of the ‘public sphere’, a claim that may be less relevant to pro-Leave and broader populist sentiment that places emphasis on the people and their democratic sovereign mandate. However, he highlights the way that this far-right ‘anti-public’ discourse has come to share a common communication wherever it is found, based on ‘strategic incivility’ and ‘a common anti-elite vernacular centred on terms such as “cultural Marxism” and “social justice warrior”’ (ibid, p. 129).

Furthermore, Hogan and Haltinner (2015, p. 520) have found that right-wing populist parties in the UK, Australia and the US drew on a ‘transnational right-wing populist “playbook”’ when constructing immigration threat narratives, including depicting immigrants as economic threats, security threats and cultural threats. Another study by Doerr (2017, p. 3) shows how the translation and adaptation of an anti-immigrant ‘black sheep’ cartoon created by the Swiss People’s Party by similar groups in Italy and Germany represented an imagined ‘racist bond of transnational solidarity’. However, there is still little empirical work that attempts to understand how and why such narratives and logics gain transnational appeal and the role social media plays in this.

Perhaps a key element of this transnational right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist mobilisation is the popularity of US President Donald Trump, whose presidential campaign is said to have been bolstered by the support of an emergent net-based movement known as the ‘alt-right’ (Hartzell, 2018, p. 15; Mirrlees, 2018, p. 52). This movement began as early as 2008 (Hartzell, 2018, p. 16) and is one of many manifestations of ‘identitarianism’ (along with the pan-European youth movement Generation Identity) (Handler, 2019; Phillips & Yi, 2018). Although technically a movement aimed at reclaiming the dominant status of ‘whiteness’ in US society (Hartzell, 2018, p. 11), the global nature of the internet and social media has seen the ‘alt-right’ gain a transnational following and align itself with far-right movements around the globe (J. Berger, 2018, pp. 5–6). The movement rejects mainstream conservatism and one of its primary aims is the construction of a white ethno-state in order to ‘protect and promote the values of an idealized white European culture’ (Mirrlees, 2018, p. 51). Spearheaded by slick-styled and postgraduate educated Richard Spencer, the ‘alt-right’ has from the outset constructed itself as a legitimate alternative form of right-wing politics by couching its rhetoric in appeals to intellectualism and deliberately distancing itself from white supremacy (Hartzell, 2018; Salazar, 2018). Meanwhile, however, the movement espouses racial separatism and biological racism and uses its ‘intellectualised spin’ (J. Berger, 2018, p. 5) to act as a ‘rhetorical bridge between mainstream public discourse and white nationalism’ (Hartzell, 2018, p. 9), with many of its most prominent individuals being overt white nationalists (J. Berger, 2018, p. 7).

The original stalwart of the movement is Spencer's online magazine *AlternativeRight.com*, but the term 'alt-right' has migrated beyond its editorial boundaries. As groups and as individuals, members of the 'alt-right' use various online avenues and a significant social media presence to disseminate their ideology and recruit or 'convert' new members (Hartzell, 2018, p. 20; Mirrlees, 2018, pp. 51–52). Salazar (2018, p. 138) draws on Foucault to demonstrate how the 'alt-right' constitutes a 'community of discourse', in part through its success in formalising a gamut of memes. Thus, in line with the nature of social media, the movement continues to be constructed and reconstructed discursively online in disparate and disorganised ways. In a large-scale analysis of self-defined 'alt-right' Twitter users and the accounts that follow them, Berger (2018, p. 53) concluded that the 'alt-right' is less a coherent ideology than a loosely related movement supporting 'a sometimes-bewildering collection of ideas and beliefs' (ibid, p. 6); more of 'an extremist political bloc' than a 'fully formed extremist ideology' (ibid, p. 7).

In addition to commonly defining itself by what it is against (in particular Islam, but also in many cases the EU, globalism, feminism, etc.), what linked this bloc most strongly was support for Trump (ibid, p. 7). As Mirrlees (2018, p. 52) attests, the 'alt-right's support for his presidency is not surprising given 'Trump fashioned himself as an authoritarian populist champion of white, conservative, working class, and petite bourgeois American men and women' and the group hoped he would 'mak[e] their racist dream of a white ethno-State come true'. Trump infamously employed editor of 'alt-right' news website *Breitbart*, Steve Bannon, as Chief Strategist upon his election, a move seen as symbolic of the legitimisation and mainstreaming of the 'alt-right' agenda (Davis, 2019, p. 128). In Mirrlees' (2018, p. 53) analysis, the 'alt-right' has failed to win a 'war of manoeuvre' for state power, but is still engaged in a 'war of position' in civil society, a hegemonic battle for hearts and minds.

One of the principle aims of the 'alt-right' has been 'exposing' the left-wing ideological forces it claims are controlling society (Hartzell, 2018, p. 20). This control is often represented by the term 'cultural Marxism', a conspiracy theory which has its roots in post-Cold War anti-socialism. The term had in fact been used by neo-Nazi groups for several decades and featured in white supremacist terrorist Anders Breivik's manifesto. However, the 'alt-right' brought its use from the fringes to the mainstream, and it has

even been used by senior figures in Trump's cabinet (Mirrlees, 2018, pp. 49–50). As the narrative goes, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* were written to urge Marxists to gain control of education and other institutions of cultural production in order to effectively brainwash the masses towards socialism. According to the theory, this strategy was brought to the US by the Frankfurt School scholars, and it subsequently influenced generations of Americans and contributed to the left-wing social movements that followed (feminism, black power, environmentalism etc.). As Mirrlees (2018, p. 49) aptly describes, the term has become 'shorthand for an anti-American bogeyman, a symbol for every liberal or left-leaning group the right defined itself against, and an epithet for progressive identities, values, ideas, and practices that reactionaries believe have made America worse than before'. Importantly, and contrary to the reality of post-1980 neoliberal hegemony (Harvey, 2007), the narrative of 'cultural Marxism' 'represents the New Left as history's victor', and it is this socialist hegemony which the 'alt-right' sees itself as engaged in a battle against (Mirrlees, 2018, p. 54). In this sense, a complex concept akin to the hegemonic consent that Gramsci indeed described has been reduced to a malevolent conspiracy theory and political battleground.

Mirrlees (2018, p. 50) argues that 'cultural Marxism' is a 'tool of intersectional hate' by which the 'alt-right' 'constructs a patriarchal, white, and Christian supremacist notion of America in response to the destabilization of this order by the ongoing pursuit of social justice and broader societal changes linked to multi-national capitalism and progressive neoliberalism'. As a conspiracy theory, 'cultural Marxism' can appeal to a desire to feel 'in the know', enabling individuals to 'imagine themselves as an intellectual vanguard – enlightened people who possess special knowledge about how the world works' (ibid, p. 58). However, Mirrlees' focus is on how this conspiracy theory is operationalised from above by this 'well-resourced and well-organized neo-fascist hate movement', rather than its explanatory appeal, and it is perhaps for this reason that he rejects interpreting 'cultural Marxism' as a 'subcultural problem-solving device' as 'misguided and far too charitable' (ibid, p. 58).

However, if we consider 'cultural Marxism' to be a conspiracy theory, understanding its appeal is essential. The affinity between conspiracy and populism has been emphasised in recent years, given both share a narrative that rests on an antagonistic and moralistic binary between the people and elites (Bergmann, 2018). Thus

conspiracies have been described as ‘populist theories of power’ as well as ‘populist theories of knowledge’ (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 362). Another conspiracy theory that is ‘a recurring theme in the rhetoric of right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist movements’ is the ‘Great Replacement’ theory. This theory posits that non-white immigration is part of a deliberate plan to replace white Europeans and their culture (Cosentino, 2020, p. 74). The theory appears in a variety of guises, including the ‘New World Order’ and the ‘Kalergi Plan’, the latter of which is particularly relevant to support for Leave as it centres around a plan for enforced ethnic mixing said to be the real reason for the European project (Bergmann, 2018, p. 22; Gaston, 2018). Although conspiracy theories have long had a degree of popularity (Bergmann, 2018, p. 5), the internet and social media arguably provide a powerful tool for their dissemination and increase their reach. Because of their Manichean understanding of power (B. Lee, 2020, p. 348) and the way they cast one’s group as a victim of a more powerful group (Smallpage et al., 2020, p. 265), conspiracy theories have also been described as having an affinity with populism (Bergmann, 2018; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). The circulation of such theories and other misleading content has been theorised as part of a broader phenomenon of ‘disinformation’, which is explored in the next sub-section.

2.3.3 Disinformation and ‘post-truth’

In recent decades Facebook has come to assume an increasingly salient role as a news and information provider (Kaspar & Müller-Jensen, 2019), and this has also made it a powerful portal for the dissemination of alternative information, including through right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist news sites and channels. These alternative news outlets are ‘self-consciously distanced from “mainstream media”’ and have their ‘own “ingroup language”, internal logics, and “shared definitions”’ (Davis, 2019, p. 133). They have been described as promoting a ‘culture wars discourse’ (ibid) that attempts to reframe issues like minority rights and environmentalism as ‘epochal struggle[s] between a benighted general public and a bullying, censorious, self-interested “left”, to be won at whatever cost’. The above-discussed ‘cultural Marxism’ is used alongside terms like ‘social justice warrior’, ‘political correctness’, ‘snowflake’ and ‘leftard’ to ‘discredit opposition by portraying their concerns as a function of ideological self-interest’ (ibid).

Of course, the way in which Facebook has come to assume a role of news and information provider and the popularity of alternative news outlets are not unrelated to contemporary declines in trust in traditional news media sources and authoritative information institutions (W. L. Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p. 245). Bennett and Livingston (2018, p. 128) use the term ‘disinformation order’ to describe this predicament, and argue that this declining trust ‘combined with the growth of alternative information channels producing popular political mythologies, is mobilizing many citizens to join the upsurge in support for movements and parties outside the centre, particularly on the right’. Accusations of ‘fake news’ levelled at traditional media outlets are a ‘prominent subtext’ of the discourses promoted by such outlets and by contemporary right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist actors more broadly (ibid, p. 126). By constructing the ‘mainstream media’ as part of a system of ideological control, alternative right-wing news outlets are able to create a sense of victimhood as well as bolster their own readership (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Thus their use is not only a symptom of declining trust, but also contributes to it. Furthermore, unverified information and inflammatory narratives circulated online ‘often feed back into the legacy press’ (W. L. Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p. 244), constituting a cycle of ‘disinformation-amplification-reverberation’ (W. L. Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 126) and contributing to the ‘mainstreaming’ of right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist ideology (Mondon & Winter, 2020).

Some researchers have used the concept of ‘mediatisation’ to explain this predicament. This is generally defined as a process whereby society and politics are increasingly ‘subsumed under media logics’ due to the important role that media plays in our lives (Kalpokas, 2019, p. 51). The concept was originally used to theorise the importance of traditional media such as newspapers and television, but is now being applied to the prominence of online media in social and political interactions in an attempt to capture the pervasiveness of media for everyday life and for social, political, economic and cultural organisation (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 191). Couldry and Hepp (2016) now refer to this as ‘deep mediatisation’, a contemporary shift whereby our social world is ‘fundamentally interwoven with media’ (ibid, p. 16). Kalpokas (2019) goes so far as to claim that mediatisation has meant our interactions are now primarily ‘mental’ rather than ‘physical’ and that these affectual virtual exchanges ‘make the self inseparable from the other’ thus creating ‘a shared affective environment that trumps the physical

environment' (ibid, p. 52). Kalpokas claims that it is because of this mediatisation of affective capacity that truth-claims 'become disembodied from verifiable facts', engendering a 'post-truth condition' that has given rise to contemporary populist politics (ibid).

This idea of a 'post-truth condition' or 'regime of post-truth' has also become a popular way to conceptualise the role of social media and the internet in the rise of right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics. A number of scholars have proclaimed this new 'post-truth' condition and represented the EU referendum result (alongside the election of US President Donald Trump) as both symptoms and harbingers of this new era (Cosentino, 2020, p. 14). When naming it word of the year in 2016 due to a 2000% increase in usage, Oxford Dictionaries defined post-truth as, 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Flood, 2016). A large number of social scientists have employed the term and make the same sweeping claims as the Oxford Dictionaries definition (e.g. Cosentino, 2020; Cvar & Bobnič, 2019; Guarda et al., 2018; Hannan, 2018; Harsin, 2015, 2018; Lakoff, 2017; McComiskey, 2017; Overell & Nicholls, 2019b; Salgado, 2018). That is, 'we now live in a post-truth world, where emotions and beliefs trump evidence-based arguments' (Cosentino, 2020), or 'modern rationality has been dangerously discarded and replaced by a strange form of powerful irrationality' (Overell & Nicholls, 2019a, p. vii). Kalpokas (2019, p. 9) even claims 'statements become true if audiences desire them to be as such' rendering a 'co-created fiction in which the distinction between truth and falsehood has become irrelevant'.

Other scholars claim a 'post-truth' condition while adopting their own understanding of the term. For instance, Boler and Davis (2018, p. 75) argue that 'it isn't as if there are somehow "more emotions" in politics now, but rather that there has been a shift in awareness of emotion as a determining factor'. Separately, Waisbord (2018, p. 20) characterises a post-truth condition not as the triumph of emotion, but rather 'the absence of conditions in the public sphere for citizens to concur on objectives and processual norms to determine the truth as verifiable statements about reality'. In Cvar & Bobnič's (2019) reading, the phenomenon of post-truth is characterised by 'a new type of aestheticization of contemporary political life' (ibid, p. 81), related to both technology and fascism (ibid, p. 82); a 'phenomenon of self-regulated network and

platform based digital ecosystem and its presupposed flat ontology between truth and opinion' (ibid, p. 88).

Social media is strongly implicated in this 'post-truth' phenomenon, and Laybatts and Treddinick (2016, p. 204) point to the potential for this to be ascribed to social media logic and the privileging of emotive content that generates more 'clicks': 'truth criteria have been designed out of technologically mediated social networks, to be replaced by content that appeals on a more emotional level'. In addition to the role of digital media, the origins of this condition have also been located in post-modernism's 'post-factual relativism' and Foucauldian challenges to 'regimes of truth' (Cosentino, 2020, p. 18; Salgado, 2018, p. 321), as well as a post-2008 crisis of trust in the 'neoliberal consensus' and 'Western-led globalization' (Cosentino, 2020, p. 10). It should be noted that there are also many scholars who employ the term 'post-truth' without clear definition, simply conflating it with the contemporary spread of disinformation or 'fake news' online (e.g. Grech, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Maddalena & Gili, 2020; Sismondo, 2017), or who base their analysis on the uncritical assumption that such a 'post-truth' predicament exists (e.g. Renner & Spencer, 2018), including blaming it for producing the 'current "populist moment"' (Waisbord, 2018, p. 18). D'Ancona (2017) proclaims a new political age in which claims to objective truth have been devalued, 'comparable to the collapse of a currency or a stock' (ibid, p. 4). Such accounts are characteristic of the sensational and unsubstantiated claims of 'post-truth' theorists.

However, there are some direct challenges to claims of a 'post-truth' condition. As Moss et al. (2020, p. 138) point out, these claims imply that politics prior to intervention by social media was based on rational and factual rather than emotional appeals, a claim easily debunked when considering age-old political issues like abortion or capital punishment (see also Brooke, 2011; Langhamer, 2012). Musolff (2017, p. 642) points out that Critical Discourse Studies 'have amply demonstrated that the popular belief in political communication as being chiefly a conduit for factual information is an ideologically biased construction and not a realistic description'. It has long been affirmed that people have a tendency to believe knowledge claims that confirm pre-existing views and reject those that challenge the values of their 'in-group', 'even in the face of hard evidence' (Ylä-Anttila, 2018; see also D. M. Kahan et al., 2011; D. Kahan, 2010; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), and concepts like

‘confirmation bias’ date back many decades (e.g. Mynatt et al., 1977). As the post-2000 ‘affective turn’ in political science demonstrates (Hoggett & Thompson, 2012), immediate emotional reactions as well as more inherent emotional dispositions can be seen playing a role in political affiliation and behaviour on both sides of the political spectrum (Moss et al., 2020, pp. 138–139). Furthermore, as Wahl-Jorgensen (2019, p. 166) points out, ‘emotionality and rationality are not mutually exclusive’. Particularly given the discussion of the affective nature of social media in 2.2.3 above, rather than dismissing emotion as an ‘irrational’ characteristic of undesirable political positions, we must incorporate it ‘as an integral part of any explanation of what it means to be engaged by, participate in and make decisions about politics’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 172).

Ylä-Anttila (2018) argues that, in contrast with traditional ‘anti-elitist populism’, ‘contemporary right-wing anti-immigration populism’ champions not emotion or ‘common sense’, but rather facts and expertise, in the form of ‘counterknowledge’. She defines ‘counterknowledge’ as ‘alternative knowledge which challenges establishment knowledge, replacing knowledge authorities with new ones, thus providing an opportunity for political mobilisation’ (ibid, p. 359). Applying the concept to Finnish anti-immigrant groups online, she observes that ‘many anti-immigration activists ... claim to hold knowledge, truth, and evidence in high esteem, even professing strictly positivist views, and strongly opposing ambivalent or relativist truth orientations ... they advocate a particular kind of objectivist counter-expertise. For them, it is the “multiculturalist elite” who are “post-truth”’ (ibid, p. 357-8). In other words, Ylä-Anttila’s findings directly challenge the claims of ‘post-truth’ theories that emotions are prioritised over facts and that the distinction between fact and fiction has become ‘irrelevant’ due to right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist mobilisations online.

2.4 Locating and explaining Brexit

Many of the political consequences of social media discussed in the previous sections, such as post-truth, disinformation and populism, have been implicated in the 2016 EU referendum result. In fact, this has been characterised as a crucial turning point for right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics in Britain and beyond. This section first locates Brexit within the scholarly debates about post-truth and the role of emotion,

before turning to two further key factors that have been identified as salient to support for Leave, namely a sense of grievance or discontent (often theorised in terms of populism), and opposition to immigration and diversity.

2.4.1 Brexit, 'post-truth' and affect

A number of studies have demonstrated the role that emotions played in voting decisions at the referendum, including finding a correlation between anger towards the EU (compared with anxiety) and wanting to Leave (Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2017); between negative emotional reactions to the EU and voting to Leave (H. D. Clarke et al., 2017), and between 'negative emotions' and Euroscepticism (Verbalyte & Scheve, 2018). As Moss et al (2020, p. 840) point out, such studies 'analyse emotion in relation to other variables, rather than looking at citizens' feelings on their own terms'. The way in which these studies attempt to measure discrete emotions and distinguish them from rationality is not unrelated to Brexit's characterisation as a 'post-truth' phenomenon and the emotional regime described above.

In fact, the majority of contemporary works on 'post-truth' give the 2016 referendum outcome (almost invariably alongside the election of Trump in the US) as a prime exemplar of the 'post-truth' condition, generally uncritically and without explanation (e.g. Rose, 2017; D. Sayer, 2017). Such characterisation is perhaps unsurprising given that, as Moss et al (2020, p. 837) highlight, the EU referendum has been depicted 'as a battle between "heads" and "hearts", reason and emotion', in which Remain was popularly portrayed as representing reason and Leave emotion (see also Manners, 2018, p. 1215). This has not only been the case in popular discourse but also in academic analysis, with scholars like Campanella & Dassù (2019b, p. 103) describing the decision to vote Leave as 'def[y]ing] any rational cost–benefit analysis' and noting that the difficulty of negotiations with Brussels following the referendum 'only confirm Brexit's fundamentally irrational nature'. Another factor that has potentially contributed to this characterisation has been the repeated portrayal (however accurately) of the Leave campaign as having made false claims, exemplified by headlines like 'Truth, lies and trust in the age of Brexit and Trump' (L. P. Marcus, 2016).

One piece which does seek to prove through critical analysis the 'post-truth' nature of Brexit is that by Marshall and Drieschova (2018). Their paper argues that Brexit was

not only a ‘key example of post-truth politics’, but that this also demonstrated that ‘emotionally charged voting has become more prevalent’ (ibid, p. 90). Specifically, they attribute this to the growing use of the internet and social media for news consumption, combined with growing distrust in institutions of authority and expert knowledge, a conclusion strikingly similar to Bennett and Livingston’s ‘disinformation order’ analysis. Drawing on existing survey data and statistics on the Leave campaign’s reliance on social media, they demonstrate the existence of these two factors, but fail to convincingly illustrate their causal relationship to a ‘post-truth politics’, which they describe as ‘a politics which seeks to emit messages into the public domain which will lead to emotionally charged reactions, with the goal of having them spread widely and without concern for the accuracy of the messages provided’ (ibid, p. 90). They focus on the declining capacity to determine the quality of information in the social media age, but rely on existing claims about ‘post-truth’ in journalistic and sensationalist accounts. One such claim is that by d’Ancona (2017) who, based on falsehoods in the Leave campaign, claims that it is the Brexit vote that marks ‘a new age of politics in which the rise of populism ... has devalued claims to objective truth’ (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018, p. 91).

Marshall and Drieschova’s analysis illustrates another reason why Brexit tends to be characterised as a ‘post-truth’ phenomenon, which has to do with declining trust in knowledge authority. This was exemplified in Leave campaigner Michael Gove’s infamous assertion in a Sky News interview in the lead-up to the referendum that ‘we have had enough of experts’ (Ryan, 2020). Although the quote is commonly truncated as such, Gove’s comment in full in fact read ‘the people of this country have had enough of experts from organisations with acronyms saying they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong’ and was a reference in particular to the failings of economists to predict or prevent the 2008 global economic crisis (Lowe, 2016). What this full and contextualised quote demonstrates is not necessarily a propensity to privilege emotions over rationality or facts, but rather a populist rejection of the kind of expertise on offer from a perceived elite political establishment based on a sense that this expertise was not only flawed but also condescending, and did not reflect the lived realities of ‘the people’.

In their paper “‘People in this country have had enough of experts’: Brexit and the paradoxes of populism’, Clarke and Newman (2017) use a conjunctural approach to examine the many factors that converged to form the Brexit moment. Among these, they argue that ‘The revolt against “expertise” in the moment of Brexit refracted questions of both class (antipathy to ruling elites, the very architects of austerity) and nation (expertise symbolized “elsewhere”; international institutions, EU bureaucrats and those seeking to protect global free trade)’ (ibid, p. 110). Although expertise was heavily utilised by the Remain campaign but rejected by Leave as ‘Project Fear’ – with Vote Leave campaigner and Labour MP Gisela Stuart quoted as saying ‘There is only one expert that matters and that’s you, the voter’ – Clarke and Newman point out that ‘the revolt against expertise did not suddenly erupt at the moment of Brexit’ (ibid, p. 111). They argue that a challenge to the “‘depoliticizing” consequences of technocratic governance’ brought about by the Blair administration’s ‘third way’ was ‘appropriated and mobilized to support a new populist project, here being articulated through a binary between expertise and the wisdom of the people’ (ibid, p. 111). However, they challenge simple representations of Brexit as a power struggle, arguing that the contestation of expertise at work is more complex. Temporality, they claim, is one axis on which this contestation worked, with the Remain campaign focused on a future which could be predicted based on which action was taken. In comparison, the Leave campaign looked to a romanticised past ‘when “we” were in control of our country, our border, our economy, and our lives’ as well as appealing to ‘the past-as-experience’. They contrast ‘the everyday dislocations and disjunctions of economic and social life with the threatened future projected by the Remain camp’ (ibid, p. 112).

Clarke and Newman are not the only researchers to highlight the significance of an appeal to nostalgia to the Leave campaign. As Manners (2018, p. 1215) notes, it ‘clearly relied on reinvented memories of the past and contested imaginary futures that work to construct subjectivity, actions, and rationales’. Campanella and Dassù (2019a) go so far as to claim Brexit as the epitome of nostalgic nationalism, and use it as a case study on which to build their assertion of an ‘age of nostalgia’. They point to the *emotional* weaponisation of nostalgia, a combination of paranoia and melancholy, capable of mobilising nations by encouraging citizens to find comfort in a pre-globalisation time when borders were still rigid, in what they term ‘nostalgic nationalism’. In their analysis, imperial nostalgia gave voters on the fence ‘a source of strong inspiration to ditch

Brussels’, despite negative economic impact in the short term’ (ibid, p. 6). The campaign for Brexit, they claim, ‘captures the economic pain of the left-behind, the social disruptions generated by immigration, and the geopolitical ambitions of a once glorious empire... nostalgic arguments have been used defensively against the European Union, offensively to boost Britain’s global influence, and cooperatively to strengthen ties with its former colonies’ (ibid, p. 4). Thus, they argue, nostalgia in Britain can simultaneously operate at the level of ‘Global Britain’ and ‘Little England’.

However, Walkerdine (2020) challenges top-down approaches that conceptualise those who supported Leave as simply duped by the campaign’s appeal to emotions or by social media-produced ‘contagion’. Based on a small study with two Welsh communities, she discusses the characterisation of Brexit as a ‘post-truth’ phenomenon, taking a particular interest in the class dynamics that may have been behind this. Specifically, she is concerned with how the working class Leave vote has been understood and its link with the pathologisation of the working class. As she notes, ‘The majority concern since the result has focused on the gullibility of ordinary people as well as their xenophobia’ (ibid, p. 144). The portrayal of social media as producers of Le Bon-esque crowds and contagion that hamper democratic rationality is related, she argues, not only to the notion that ordinary people are incapable of standing back and engaging with ‘the facts’, but also to ‘the understanding of liberal democracy as governed via modes of regulation in which reasoning or being reasonable win the day’ (ibid, p. 146). She thus criticises recent ‘post-truth’ literature, which she finds less concerned with the power of social media than with the ‘unreason of the masses’ (ibid). Based on the findings of her study, long-standing issues in communities played a significant role, including about ‘local control and lack of attention, history of socialism and sense of loss and neglect and anger’ (ibid, p. 152). Thus, she argues that researchers need an approach to understanding Brexit and affect that attends to complex histories as well as current embodied practices and concerns, including a history of Othering experienced by the working class ‘in which their attempts to make public their feelings, were delegitimized’ (ibid, p. 153). This understanding of ‘white working class’ resentment as driving Brexit is aptly challenged by scholars like Bhambra (2017b) and is examined in further depth in the next section, but it is worth noting that Walkerdine’s paper is one of only a handful that base their arguments on evidence from interviews

and other close-up methods which ask, rather than assume, the sentiments of the Leave voters they analyse.

One other such study is that of Moss et al. (2020), who analysed responses to a Mass Observation Archive directive around Brexit. However, these researchers take a different approach to researching the emotions involved in Brexit, by analysing how the role of emotion in public life is understood in the specific context of the referendum. They draw on Reddy's (2001) concept of 'emotional regimes' to examine the accepted norms around emotion, concluding that it was simultaneously understood as a dangerous source of irrational voting behaviour and a valid and authentic source of knowledge. The roots lay in respondents' understanding of emotion as personal and individual (despite it being produced socially). Thus, despite it being impossible to separate emotion from reason, popular understandings construct these as 'distinct and competing' (Moss et al., 2020, p. 851). Unsurprisingly, the researchers found that Remainer respondents 'often portrayed Leave voters as uneducated, either unwilling or unable to understand and engage with expert arguments, and therefore more susceptible to lies', and that 'Leave voters were aware of the emotional charges against them' (ibid, p. 847). In turn, Remain voters were characterised by their opponents as childish tantrum-throwers who were unable to control their emotional outbursts. However, voters on both sides 'employed their feelings in ways that encompassed *both* emotion and reason' (ibid, p. 844, emphasis in original). Importantly, the authors argue that respondents' understandings of emotion around Brexit did not represent a novel emotional regime but grew out of 'the particular emotional context of early twenty-first-century Britain' (ibid, p. 842), and thus actively challenge the 'post-truth' conceptualisation of politics as having undergone a significant shift towards emotionality.

What is also interesting about Moss and colleagues' observations is that a significant part of feelings about Brexit are feelings about those on the other side of the Brexit debate. Respondents in their study were fatigued by the angry and divisive nature of the campaign and its aftermath, with some even likening the atmosphere in Britain to a 'civil war' or 'battlefield' (ibid, p. 848). This is in line with the assertion by Hobolt et al (2020) that 'affective polarisation' is occurring around Brexit. Aptly pointing to the lack of research on the effects (as opposed to the causes) of the referendum regarding

identities and divisions, they argue, based on a range of survey and experimental data, that new and salient social identities have developed between Leave and Remain camps that cut across traditional party lines. Their assertions are echoed in commentary by Lord (2018) and Featherstone (2017) that Brexit has exposed and enflamed divisions in British society. According to Hobolt et al., in addition to in-group identification, this affective polarisation also creates differentiation from the out-group that leads to animosity and prejudice. It is also accompanied by an evaluative bias in how individuals perceive the world and make decisions; that is, ‘People will evaluate political outcomes via the lens of their identity and people will make decisions based on that identity’ (Hobolt et al., 2020, p. 7). Out-group animosity in particular, they contend, exacerbates the kind of ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers’ discussed in 2.2.1. However, Hobolt et al. attribute divergence in worldviews and evaluations of political outcomes to the notion that individuals ‘use their partisanship to construct “objective facts”’ (Achen & Bartels, 2017, p. 276), regrettably ignoring the role of the dynamics of media use in shaping individuals’ perceptions of political reality.

In summary, much focus has been afforded to the emotional nature of the referendum and support for Leave in particular, but sociologists have pointed to the need for more nuanced and holistic approaches that consider emotions in their social context and with reference to the emotional regimes that influence their role. The next sub-section examines an aspect of Brexit that is closely linked with its purported emotionality: its relationship to grievance and thus populism.

2.4.2 Brexit, grievance and populism

Perhaps one of the reasons Brexit has been characterised as being an emotional decision is the frequent reference to some form of grievance or discontent in explanations for support for Leave. Scholars like Flinders (2018, 2020) and Marsh (2018) have described Brexit as an ‘anti-politics’ or ‘expression of anti-political sentiment’, loosely defined as a distrust for the political elite and rejection of government authority. As Clarke and Newman (2017, p. 107) contend, ‘The campaign itself explicitly evoked – and claimed to speak for – a range of affective conditions: a sense of loss (for the ‘great’ in Great Britain), a feeling of betrayal, a sense of abandonment, and a series of more amorphous fears and anxieties about the future’. This sub-section explores accounts of such

discontents, and the way in which they are related to the characterisation of the Leave campaign and referendum result as ‘populist’.

One of the most popular tropes that arose in attempts to explain the referendum result was the idea of the ‘left-behind’, a group of disaffected (working class) citizens who seized the opportunity to voice their discontent by voting to Leave (e.g. Ford, 2016; Freedland, 2016; M. J. Goodwin & Heath, 2016). Accordingly, a variety of academic works have arisen to challenge this terminology and coin their own neologism. However, many of these works deviate little from the idea of the ‘left-behind’ in that they variously proposed explanations revolving around some form of grievance, marginalisation, alienation or disenfranchisement experienced by Leave voters. For instance Watson (2018), focusing on why the Remain campaign’s appeal to economic arguments were unsuccessful, argues that it is more useful to consider Leave voters as the ‘let-down’, that is, those who had not seen the benefits from the restructuring of the British economy and globalisation. This observation is in line with an argument by Finlayson (2016) that those who felt they had lost out from globalisation were more likely to vote Leave. These citizens, Watson contends, had suffered such poor conditions in recent decades that they did not see how things could be any worse if Britain left the EU. They had long felt ‘abandoned by the political process’ (Watson, 2018, p. 19) after having been forced to cope with the effects of deindustrialisation and austerity, and they felt alienated from Remain camp arguments about the effects of Brexit, such as predictions of £4000 pound reductions in annual household income and loss of everyday luxuries. In Watson’s words, ‘The campaign showed that there are a substantial number of people who do not respond positively to being told to do what is best for the economy, because the economy is not something they feel does right by them’ (ibid, p. 18). While he cites research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that Leave voters were more likely to feel their area had been excluded from national economic success and to blame politicians for this (Case, 2016), Watson’s paper is based on theoretical argument rather than empirical work with the voters whose sentiments he purports to understand.

In contrast, McKenzie (2017a, 2017b) bases her arguments about Leave voters on in-depth, close-up work with individuals, and is one of few researchers to do so. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with two separate working-class communities, she describes

some similar sentiments to Watson. Of her participant group she summarises, ‘[they] did not vote Leave because they thought it would improve their lives [but] because they just couldn't stand it being the same’ (McKenzie, 2017a, p. S278). However, while McKenzie’s participants as she describes them indeed experienced economic poverty, her focus, drawing on scholars like Beverley Skeggs and Mike Savage, is on the cultural marginalisation they experienced as members of the working class, and a sense of political disenfranchisement stemming from a lack of meaningful political representation. This marginalisation, which she claims is more accurately described as being ‘left out’ than ‘left behind’, has led to a sense of political apathy, with many of her participants being non-voters. However, the Brexit referendum gave participants an opportunity to cast a protest vote outside of traditional party politics, one which made them feel empowered and legitimate in their anger, and gave them ‘an opportunity to push back against the expectations of privileged elites’ (McKenzie, 2017b, pp. 204–205). These findings are echoed by those of Koch’s (2017) ethnography on a council estate. McKenzie also points to the way in which the patronising rhetoric around the ‘left-behind’ has reproduced negative stereotypes of the ‘white working class’ which characterise them as problematic and culturally impoverished (McKenzie, 2017b, p. 208).

While McKenzie’s and Koch’s claims may be useful for understanding the motivations of working-class Leave voters, theirs and Watson’s arguments about sentiments behind the referendum result are flawed in that, as researchers like Dorling (2016) and Antonucci et al. (2017) point out, it was in fact the middle classes who made up a larger proportion of the Leave vote. Thus, Bhabra (2017b) challenges the disproportionate focus on the ‘white working class’ that stems from the prominent but erroneous attribution of the Leave result to this group (e.g. Crampton, 2016; Gutteridge, 2016; J. Harris, 2016; O’Neill, 2016). This, she claims, is based on a fetishisation of the ‘white working class’, and works to legitimise their racialised claims around immigration and multiculturalism. Importantly, she points out that minority ethnic groups have been hardest hit by the economic crisis and subsequent austerity policies, yet were more likely to vote Remain. Of course, ‘the working class is not white’ (Mondon & Winter, 2019, p. 516), and socio-economic deprivation and political disenfranchisement is often experienced more acutely by minority ethnic groups (ibid). Thus, Bhabra (2017b, p. S217) argues, ‘to discuss the “left behind” simply in terms of the white working class,

and to rationalize their vote for Brexit and Trump in terms of their economic position, is to conflate socio-economic position with racialized identity while claiming to speak only about class and to repudiate identity politics'. Speaking of the 'white working class' as a 'forgotten' group not only legitimises disingenuous claims of a zero-sum game in which progress towards greater equality for minority ethnic groups results in worsening conditions for 'whites', but also obscures the structural conditions that lead to marginalisation in favour of a focus on racial identity (ibid, pp. S218-219, S221). Bhambra is apt to call attention to this, and the racialisation of immigrants and Muslims in particular have been shown to have been extremely salient in support for Leave, as is discussed in the next sub-section. However, as noted in 1.0, understanding the Leave vote does necessitate understanding the *felt* or *perceived* (and therefore *experienced*) marginalisation or disempowerment of Leave supporters in its own right.

Following on from the problematic attribution of the Leave vote to the working class that scholars like Bhambra identify, more cultural and socio-political explanations have arisen. For instance, Gilbert (2015, pp. 39–40) points to a broad 'sense of democratic and political disenfranchisement' and contends that opposition to Britain's membership of the EU should 'be understood as, in part, expressions of frustration with the lack of meaningful democratic participation'. Based in part on Gilbert's argument, Clarke and Newman (2017, p. 106) propose considering the complex 'political-cultural dynamics' that were involved in the Leave vote. In that a 'decline of trust in political processes and politicians was a potent theme in the Leave campaign' (ibid, p. 108), they focus on the way in which 'the Leave campaign promised to "take back control" and put "us" in charge of "our destiny"' (ibid, p. 107).

As in many works, Clarke and Newman assume a 'populist' nature of Brexit and the Leave campaign (e.g. Calhoun, 2017; Cox, 2017; Freedon, 2017; Gusterson, 2017; Iakhnis et al., 2018; Khosravini, 2017; Kinnvall, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Schroeder, 2019). This is perhaps because, despite populism's definition remaining heavily contested (Brubaker, 2017b), its two most commonly recognised tenets are anti-elitism and people-centrism, both of which are identifiable in aspects of the campaign and arguably are related to the kinds of protest votes against disenfranchisement described above. Anti-elitism refers to populism's emphasis on a distinction between the virtuous or pure people and a corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004, 2007), while, following

from this, people-centrism is the notion that politics should be about respecting the (self-evident and authentic) will of this virtuous people, who are assumed to be (ethnically, nationally and/or culturally) homogeneous (Krämer, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Rooduijn, 2019). As Clarke and Newman (2017) point out, people-centrism was articulated in Nigel Farage's appeals to 'little people' and 'ordinary people', whose victory he proclaimed on the day of the result, and this observation is echoed by Freedon (2017, p. 7). In Clarke and Newman's (2017, p. 108) analysis, the groundwork for this appeal was laid by New Labour and developed by subsequent governments, through their promotion of anti-welfarist, anti-statist, and austerity policies that created the virtuous people as 'hard working, responsible families' and demonised welfare recipients. However, when it comes to anti-elitism, Clarke and Newman contend that the Brexit campaign 'differs from classical conceptions of populism, in that it goes beyond the binary distinction between the People and the Elite' and identifies at least three groups who in this vision had 'beset and betrayed' the British people: the out-of-touch and Europhilic metropolitan-cosmopolitan liberal elite; the Brussels-based European elite seeking to threaten British liberty; and migrants who were consuming scarce resources thanks to European freedom of movement (ibid, p. 107).

These researchers also point to the "performative" or "articulatory" quality of populist politics where a critical element involves discovering the proper voice ... through which repressed or marginalized structures of feeling might be evoked and spoken for' (J. Clarke & Newman, 2017, p. 108). Thus, they emphasise also the way in which those who claimed to represent the concerns of these marginalised 'people' in the Brexit campaign, like Farage, Gove or Johnson, were themselves members of an elite political class. It is for this very reason that Freedon (2017, p. 6) challenges the common characterisation of populism as an 'uprising' or 'grassroots' phenomenon: populism 'feeds on a sense of beleaguerment' by manipulating these sentiments, but does not directly articulate the political agenda of the beleaguered. In other words, 'resentment towards political decision-makers, and a resistance to the policies or perceived apathy of central governments, does not necessarily equate with populist sentiments, but with a plethora of partially unrelated grievances that more marginalized sections of the population carry, and that are then aggregated, coalesced, and diluted through populist rhetoric' (ibid, pp. 4-5). As Clarke and Newman (2017, p. 108) recognise, the Leave

campaign effectively voiced the feelings of being ignored or abandoned, ‘and found a potent articulatory principle through which such feelings might find redress’.

Thus, while the kinds of grievances identified above as held by Leave voters may not automatically lead to the need to characterise Brexit as a populist phenomenon, the link between Brexit and populism can be found in the way in which these were exploited through populist campaign rhetoric. The slogan ‘Take back control’ was both sufficiently clear and sufficiently vague, as well as being a ‘call to action’ (J. Clarke & Newman, 2017, p. 108). In this, Clarke and Newman argue, ‘the Leave campaign found a political register in which the ‘dispossessed’ could find themselves represented’ (ibid, p. 109). This is particularly important if we consider Mouffe’s (2005) attribution of the rise of right-wing populist parties to the inability of traditional parties to take into account democratic demands. In Mouffe’s analysis, populist parties fill this gap by articulating these demands and providing hope that things could be different. She attests that the ‘moralistic reaction’ to right-wing populist parties and conceptualisation of politics in terms of ‘good’ vs ‘evil’ has further exacerbated this lack of a legitimate avenue for political expression (ibid, pp. 71-75). Although British politics in recent years has moved away from the gradual shifting towards centre and consensus around globalisation by mainstream parties to which she attributes this growing sense of lack of representation, the core of her argument may still be relevant. She argues that ‘the absence of an effective pluralism entails the impossibility for antagonisms to find agonistic, i.e. legitimate, forms of expression. It is no wonder that, when they explode, those antagonisms take extreme forms’ (ibid, p. 82).

One of the few scholars who has examined the nature of pro-Leave sentiments *since* the referendum is Browning (2019). He observes the way in which the referendum result has provoked not only relief and joy but also anxiety and anger amongst the Leave-supporting population. Browning uses theories of subjectivity and ontological insecurity to explain the seductive populist fantasies with which Brexit became invested as well as the reasons they are unable to be fulfilled. The referendum, he argues, became invested with ‘the emotional politics of identity and subjectivity’ (ibid, p. 222) and was for many ‘a deeply emotional experience in which “leaving” or “remaining” in the EU has been ascribed with fundamental ontological significance’ (ibid, p. 223). He emphasises the connection between this and ‘a disparate sense of economic, social and

political crisis and marginalization experienced at an everyday level' (ibid, p. 226). In particular, he argues that the stigmatisation of English national identity in recent years has contributed to this group's marginalisation and sense of having their value as citizens questioned.

Regardless of whether it is necessary to characterise such marginalisation as 'ontological', Browning's analysis of the populist fantasy narratives on which the Leave campaign was built is relevant to analyses of the 'populist' nature of Brexit. These narratives, he contends, promised 'freedom, liberation, subjectivity and agency' (ibid, p. 223), but cannot be fulfilled, both because they are nostalgic and because their inherently contradictory nature generates continued anxiety, disillusionment and alienation. Part of their power, Browning argues, lies in the way in which they are predicated on an 'if only' style of 'identification of obstacles to be overcome', which has imbued them with drama and enabled them to 'create space for a transgressive politics challenging established norms of political discourse' and 'perform a sense of crisis' (ibid, p. 222-223).

Unfortunately, once again a shortcoming of Browning's piece, which is shared by both Freedman's and Clarke and Newman's arguments, is their basis in theoretical reflections rather than empirical evidence, and their presumptions about the appeal of the campaign to individuals. It is also challenged by empirical work that suggests that the referendum result in fact promoted the 'softening' of anti-immigration attitudes, because it provided Leavers a greater sense of control over immigration, and because Leavers wished to 'distance themselves from accusations of xenophobia and racism' (Schwartz et al., 2020, p. 1).

Furthermore, Roodujin (2019) cautions against over-application of the term populism. Because of the above-identified importance of the homogeneity of the people to populism, the creation of an opposition or enemy to this in-group in the form of immigrants or ethnic/religious minorities is common, and some scholars argue that such exclusionist attitudes are a necessary tenet of populism (Reinemann et al., 2016). On the other hand, Roodujin argues convincingly that while nativism often coincides with populism, the two are separate phenomena and should not be conflated. Nativism, a concept traditionally more popular among scholars in the US than in the UK, refers to an antipathy towards 'foreign' groups (be they foreign in their nationality, culture or

religion) who are perceived to be a danger or threat to the nation (Friedman, 1967, p. 408; Ward, 2014, p. 268). Considered critically, it is understood as a system of racist oppression of those deemed non-native for the purpose of justifying the superiority and dominance of the native (Huber et al., 2008; Lippard, 2011, p. 595; Marable, 1992, p. 42) and is predicated on the assumptions that 1) linguistic and cultural diversity pose a threat to national identity; 2) public policy, as a result of multiculturalism, has been increasingly geared against the white majority; and 3) immigrants take undue advantage of welfare, education and health system benefits, resources which are deemed to be limited and of which they are deemed to be less deserving than natives (Sanchez, 1997). Indeed, when it comes to Brexit, Iakhnis et al. (2018, p. 1) found in their survey that ‘The relationship between anti-elite sentiment and support for leaving the EU only exists among those with high nativist sentiment’. This was echoed by findings of Abrams and Travaglino (2018), and offers the possibility that concepts like ‘nativism’ may be more appropriate for understanding pro-Leave sentiment. The following subsection discusses such anti-immigration sentiments, their relationship to race and racism, and their significance to Brexit.

2.4.3 Brexit, immigration and Islam

A Lord Ashcroft poll on the referendum showed that alongside the desire for greater control over legislation (reflected in part by grievances around political disenfranchisement explored above), immigration was a top concern of those voting Leave (Ashcroft, 2016). Goodman (2017) also found in a discourse analysis of the referendum campaign that a focus on immigration was a major factor in Leave’s success. Goodwin and Milazzo’s (2017) results support this too; their quantitative study found that negative attitudes towards immigration were a key predictor of support for Leave. Interestingly, they also found that it was areas that had experienced increasing rates of immigration, rather than those with long-established minority populations, that had higher Leave votes.

As Virdee and McGeever (2018) demonstrate with relation to the Leave campaign, and as is well-established in the scholarship on new and cultural racism (Barker, 1981; Garner, 2010; Miles & Brown, 2003; Taguieff, 1990), anxieties around immigration are inextricably tied up with race. For instance, Virdee and McGeever point to the way in which the nostalgia mobilised by the official Vote Leave campaign (see 2.4.1) was an

example of post-colonial melancholia (Gilroy, 2004) – a failure to come to terms with Britain’s loss of imperial prestige that occludes the racism of the colonial project (Virdee & McGeever, 2018, p. 1803). Alongside this, the Leave.EU campaign spearheaded by former UKIP leader Nigel Farage, ‘was more insular and Powellite in tone’ (ibid), centring explicitly on concerns around immigration which culminated in the infamous ‘Breaking Point’ poster. Virdee and McGeever also point to the rise in reported racist hate crimes following the referendum (many of which included reference to Brexit, e.g. ‘we voted you out’) as evidence that the campaign activated racist sentiments (ibid, p. 1808) and argue that the toxicity of the referendum has helped to normalise racism and embolden the populist and nativist right (ibid, p. 1811). However, they argue that the two campaigns’ success rested precisely on the way they both ‘carefully activated *long-standing* racialized structures of feeling about immigration and national belonging’ (ibid, p. 1804, emphasis added); ‘a reservoir of latent racism’ (p. 1807). This was cleverly orchestrated through the use of coded language about immigration that signalled the racialised intentions of the campaign while conforming to ‘post-racial’ logics (ibid; Lentin, 2014). Both Bhabra (2017a, 2017b) and Clarke and Newman (2017) echo this emphasis on the significance of post-colonial racisms to the campaign.

There are two other important aspects to Virdee and McGeever’s argument: the significance of Islamophobia to the Leave campaign, and the significance of English nationalism. Regarding the first, they highlight the way in which the Leave.EU campaign simultaneously constructed migrants as an economic threat, giving traction to the notion that their target of exclusion was white Europeans and therefore not based on racism, while also constructing them as a security threat. The latter, against the backdrop of terrorist incidents in continental Europe, was effective as it ‘dovetailed so neatly with long-standing repertoires of negatively evaluated representations accompanying the on-going racialization of the figure of the Muslim’ (Virdee & McGeever, 2018, p. 1807; see also Alexander, 2017). Although leaving the EU technically promised only to end freedom of movement within Europe, for many Brexiteers, leaving the European Union represented ‘an important opportunity to limit the numbers of Muslims entering Britain, Muslims whose culture many of them believed was incompatible with being British’ (Virdee & McGeever, 2018, p. 1807).

As Rhodes and Hall (2020) contend, anti-immigration politics in Britain and beyond increasingly centre on the figure of the ‘Muslim’ (see also Brubaker, 2017a; Gupta & Virdee, 2018; Valluvan, 2017; Vieten & Poynting, 2016), and thus the relationship between the Leave campaign and anti-Muslim or anti-Islam sentiment should be understood within a context of the ‘intensification and banalization of Islamophobic sentiment, policy and practice in Britain, alongside the increased targeting, both violent and mundane, of British Muslims’ (Alexander, 2017, p. 13). This is not new (Kundnani, 2012b, p. 156), but has arguably intensified since the Syrian conflict, the ‘migrant (or refugee) crisis’ and Isis-led terrorist incidents in continental Europe in the mid-2010s (De Genova, 2018b). Opposition to Islam and Muslim immigration have been framed as claims to patriotism and defending the nation (Pilkington, 2016), or more broadly as defending white European civilisation (Bhatt, 2012; Brubaker, 2017a). A threat of ‘Islamisation’ is seen by some as a planned conspiracy (Fekete, 2012; Swami et al., 2018), and constitutes a fundamental part of contemporary ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy theories described in 2.3.2. In recent decades, groups like the English Defence League (EDL) and Britain First have also framed this opposition as a ‘defence of secular and liberal values’ such as the rights of women, sexual minorities and animals (Rhodes & Hall, 2020, p. 288; see also Busher, 2016; Pilkington, 2016; Copsey, 2010; Allen, 2011), or defence of Jewish minorities (Burke, 2018). However, this purported progressiveness is described by Brubaker as ‘strikingly contradictory’ given that its form of ‘liberalism’ is also ‘deeply illiberal’ (Brubaker, 2017a, p. 1210).

Although many groups have sought to decouple Islam from Muslims, disavowing racism by contending that they are opposed to a religion or ideology rather than a group of people (Allen, 2011; Burke, 2018; Busher, 2016; Copsey, 2010; Jackson, 2018; John et al., 2006; Kassimeris & Jackson, 2015; Pilkington, 2016), as Alexander argues, Islam cannot be separated from Muslims, nor can the notion of ‘Muslims’ be separated ‘from the black and brown bodies who form the largest proportion of Muslims in Britain, and globally’ (Alexander, 2017, p. 15). The positioning of Islam as a threat to Western cultural values (e.g. Allen, 2010; Fekete, 2009; Kundnani, 2014; H. J. Smith, 2016; I. Yilmaz, 2016) has been accompanied by a clear political narrative that has blamed Muslims for a supposed lack of societal cohesion, positioned them as a threat to national security, and held individual Muslims responsible for challenging violent extremism (e.g. Kundnani, 2007; Matthews, 2015, p. 270). Jackson locates this in an understanding

of Muslims as ‘the living bearers of an immutable “Islamic culture”, which conditions their psychology, behaviour and actions in a fundamentally different way to members of other cultures’ (Jackson, 2018, p. 14). This essentialisation of culture, she contends, sees tensions as the inevitable outcome of cultural mixing, a thinking compatible with ‘new’, ‘differentialist’ and ‘cultural’ racisms (Balibar, 1991; Barker, 1981; Taguieff, 1990). For these reasons, Islamophobia, like that promoted by the Leave campaign, is understood within race and ethnicity studies as a form of racialisation and racism (e.g. Garner & Selod, 2015; Mondon & Winter, 2017; Sayyid & Vakil, 2010, p. 276).

Regarding Virdee and McGeever’s (2018) second point, the importance of English nationalism, Henderson et al. (2017) found that those who reported a stronger English than British identity were more likely to have voted Leave, and that such a trend was not present for the other nations of the UK. Virdee and McGeever link this ‘politics of Englishness’ to exclusionism and racism, by highlighting the way that the kind of imperial nostalgia discussed above is most comfortably associated with English national identity. They also point to a ‘politics of nationalist resentment’ (Virdee & McGeever, 2018, p. 1804) that has resulted from structural decline and subsequent experiences of downward mobility that are framed racially. Thus, ‘Englishness has been reasserted through a racializing, insular nationalism, and it found its voice in the course of Brexit’ (ibid; see also Calhoun, 2016, pp. 51–54; Fenton, 2012; Ware, 2008).

These anxieties around immigration and nationalism are not unrelated to the discontents and grievances discussed in the previous sub-section. As Kenny (2016, pp. 326–327) notes, Englishness has been historically portrayed as ‘regressive, nostalgic and anti-modern’ and as a threat to Britain’s multicultural unity and membership in the EU. Browning (2019) notes that this forms part of the perceived ‘marginalisation’ of ‘indigenous’ white populations, and thus has given rise to right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics (see also Rhodes & Hall, 2020; Solomos, 2013; Vieten & Poynting, 2016). Policies of immigration and multiculturalism are also seen as having contributed to this discontent or ‘backlash’ (R. Hewitt, 2005; Rhodes, 2010), and as Gupta and Virdee (2018, p. 1750) note, within the context of these ‘long-simmering sensitivities’, intensified by the ‘migration crisis’ of 2015, ‘the EU is increasingly held to be an apparatus for supporting immigration and the accommodation of difference’.

While the above-mentioned works are valuable theoretical contributions to conceptualising the role of immigration and race to support for Leave, there is a dearth of qualitative empirical evidence that addresses this specific problem. In fact, the studies by Walkerdine (2020) and McKenzie (2017a, 2017b) reviewed in section 2.4.1 and 2.4.2 explicitly pointed to the lack of reference to immigration by their working class participants, indicating the need for deeper investigation into the way in which the broader pro-Leave group make sense of the role of immigration and race in the politics of Brexit. Furthermore, none of the above-mentioned studies have addressed the role of social media in this, despite claims in literature reviewed in 2.4.1 that Brexit is emblematic of a net-driven wave of truth and value relativism and nationalist populism. The following section examines studies that do investigate Brexit in the context of social media.

2.5 Social media and Brexit

Having reviewed both studies of social media and of Brexit discretely, I now draw on the few studies that consider them together to demonstrate the limited understanding we have so far of the relationship between Brexit and individuals' use of the UK's most popular social media platform, Facebook.

As noted above, sociological studies have tended to ignore the role that social media may play in expressing, shaping or disseminating pro-Leave sentiment. However, of those studies into the relationship between Brexit and social media, the majority have focused on Twitter, perhaps because of the relative ease of collection and analysis of data from the platform. These include studies on the operation of 'bots' during the referendum campaign (Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Gorodnichenko et al., 2018; Howard & Kollanyi, 2016), the circulation of 'soft facts' about Brexit, including 'rumours, conspiracy theories and propaganda' (Dobrevva et al., 2019), and patterns of emotional expressions on the platform in the aftermath of the referendum (Bouko & Garcia, 2020). In line with studies that have emphasised the role of emotion and of affective polarisation in Brexit (see 2.4.1), Rosa and Ruiz (2020) found that among the tweets of political actors around Brexit, those that appealed to emotion and the debasement of opposing views generated higher numbers of Likes, Comments and Retweets. However,

these studies focus primarily on the supply side of discourse and ideology online, or behavioural traces, assuming that the reality of individuals' engagement reflects these.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 1, a focus on Twitter is problematic in the context of Brexit firstly because the number of active Twitter users in the UK is far fewer than that of Facebook (O'Dea, 2018), and secondly because Twitter use in the UK is more heavily concentrated in the young and highly-educated segments of the population (Mellon & Prosser, 2017; Sloan, 2017). This means that older and less-educated cohorts, who are most likely to have voted Leave in 2016 (Ashcroft, 2016), are more likely to use Facebook than Twitter. Although high-profile individual right-wing populist actors (such as Katie Hopkins and Paul Joseph Watson) have tended to engage large audiences on Twitter, many official pro-Brexit accounts such as UKIP, For Britain, and Make Britain Great Again, have enjoyed larger followings on Facebook than on Twitter (B. Lee, 2019, p. 17). Britain First, which has shared many of its stances and supporters with UKIP (Davidson & Berezin, 2018), was also Liked by more than 2 million users on Facebook prior to incurring a permanent ban in March 2018 (Hern & Rawlinson, 2018), demonstrating the significance of the Facebook platform to this audience.

Those studies that *have* looked at Facebook in relation to Brexit have mostly been limited in their ability to provide insights into the human phenomenon of social media use. For example, Bossetta et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study during the referendum campaign to investigate the relationship between engagement with political news on Facebook and participation in political campaign Posts, and concluded that Leave supporters were more likely to express anger than Remain supporters and, unsurprisingly, that a positive correlation potentially exists between political interest and participation on Facebook. Meanwhile, Del Vicario et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative analysis of users' information consumption patterns around Brexit on Facebook, finding the existence of distinct echo chambers. The handful of qualitative studies that have related Brexit to Facebook are mostly limited to analyses of samples of discourse on particular Pages (Bonacchi et al., 2018; Fuchs, 2018b; Lilleker and Bonacci, 2017), providing insights into the content of discussions there that echo some of the themes highlighted in 2.4 above, including the importance of nostalgic nationalism and identity.

While all of these studies draw conclusions about the nature of engagement with the Leave campaign and Brexit-related content online, they fail to take into account the role of social media logic, communicative norms and the performative nature of social media which mean that activity on these platforms are not mirrors of, or windows into, society, nor do they necessarily provide access to users' 'real' or 'true' sentiments (Hogan, 2010). Thus, these studies provide little insight into what motivates users to produce, consume and circulate content about Brexit, and engage with political issues on such platforms, or the consequences of this engagement.

Furthermore, while there has been much research into various aspects of the social media use of younger people, including for political participation and expression (Bäck et al., 2019; Edgerly et al., 2018; Ekström & Shehata, 2018; Loader et al., 2014, 2016; Macafee & De Simone, 2012; Penney, 2018; Prøitz, 2018; Schuster, 2013; Storsul, 2014; Sveningsson, 2014; Vromen et al., 2015, 2016; Yamamoto et al., 2015, 2017; Y. Zhou & Pinkleton, 2012), the middle-aged and older population's use of social media has received less attention. This use is generally assumed to be distinct from that of younger users (Vošner et al., 2016) who have grown up with the internet and are sometimes called 'digital natives' (Palfrey and Gasser, 2013). A handful of studies have looked into the social media literacy of older people (e.g. Alcalá, 2014; Daneels & Vanwynsberghe, 2017; Rasi et al., 2020; Schreurs et al., 2017; Xie et al., 2012) or their use of online technology to maintain social connections with others and combat loneliness (e.g. Amaral & Daniel, 2018; Bell et al., 2013; Beneito-Montagut et al., 2018; Fernández-Ardèvol et al., 2019; Hutto et al., 2015; Leist, 2013; Quan-Haase et al., n.d.; Rios et al., 2019), but the political social media use of middle-aged and older people remains relatively ignored. One study which compared older people's social media use in China and the US concluded that 'even when they have access to the Internet, [older adults] have ambivalent or negative attitudes toward political activities online' (Xie & Jaeger, 2008). However, this finding, reported not long after social media's inception, is now outdated given the rapidly changing social media realm. The contemporary political social media use of non-digital-natives in Britain clearly warrants examination given the fact that the Leave vote and support for UKIP tended to be higher in areas with older populations (Goodwin and Heath, 2016), and the implications made by the above-reviewed studies that social media have played a key role in recent right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist sentiment.

2.6 Conclusion: Situating the current study

This chapter has reviewed the relevant existing literature about the way social media use is shaping the contemporary political landscape, particularly in terms of developments in right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics online, as well as literature on support for Leave. Overall, I have argued that there is a significant research gap in close-up, qualitative research that examines the relationship between older people's social media use and Brexit.

While notions like echo chambers and polarisation have been used in research attempting to conceptualise the effects of political social media use, the impact of such phenomena remains contested due to the limitations of quantitative generalisations to understand complex usage pattern dynamics. The framework of social media logic has provided a less deterministic and more holistic way to theorise the effects of social media, including the role of emotions and affect, but this has not been sufficiently applied to Facebook, and few studies have actually spoken to individuals about their social media use and what it means to them. In social media studies in general, a focus on quantitative and computational methods has done little to further our understanding of how and why people use these platforms and the consequences of this.

The existence of conspiracy theories and disinformation online has often been taken as proof of their impact, without examining the reasons for their appeal. Meanwhile, social media has been theorised to play a role in the 'rise' of populism or the advent of a new era of 'post-truth' without sufficient critical and empirical interrogation of these assumptions. This has also spawned claims that Brexit is a harbinger of a new era in which emotions matter more than rationality or fact in politics. Such assertions arguably represent a regressive development in the study of political affect that ignores the fundamental role of emotions to social and political life, as well as new evidence that some right-wing populist groups online in fact heavily employ 'scientific' evidence in a positivist fashion in political contests over knowledge.

Emotional regimes and affective polarisation appear clearly relevant to Brexit, but sociologists have pointed to the need for more nuanced and holistic approaches that consider emotions in their social context and with reference to the emotional regimes that influence their role. Regarding pro-Leave sentiment specifically, there appears

immutable evidence of a link with attitudes towards immigration, race and Islam, and post-imperial nostalgia, but the few studies that have actually spoken to Leave voters about their motives have focussed solely on the working class and their sense of cultural and political marginalisation. Given that the referendum was effectively won not by the working-class but the middle-class vote, and that a sense of political disaffection and distrust appears to be more widely exploited by populist pro-Leave rhetoric, a broader approach is needed.

Very few studies link Brexit and social media, and those that do either focus on Twitter or have failed to incorporate close-up empirical approaches that connect online content with offline lives. A focus on big data and computational techniques in empirical work on social media severs online content from the offline context in which it is produced, consumed and circulated, and does little to further our understanding of how and why people use these technologies politically and the consequences of this. Uncovering the human story behind Facebook Posts and making the link between online content and social reality necessitates close-up qualitative enquiry that contextualises our understanding of what social media and its content means to users. Indeed, as the above sections of this chapter have shown, this dearth of interpretive research that speaks to individuals in order to understand their own meaning-making is characteristic of both the topic of support for Brexit and that of political social media use. This significant gap in sociology's understanding of political social media use around Brexit is the focus of the current study, the method for which is outlined in the following chapter.

3. Researching Brexit on Facebook: A novel methodological approach

3.1 Introduction

In response to the research gap identified in Chapter 2, this chapter outlines the novel method that was developed for this research project and discusses its rationale. I first set out the overall epistemological approach of the study, before turning to the sampling, including how potential participants were identified and contacted, and their informed consent obtained. I then give details of the fieldwork and data collection, and describe the method employed for analysing the gathered data. Finally, I discuss the ethical considerations and issues that arose in the process of conducting the study, particularly regarding researcher positionality.

3.2 Epistemological approach

As noted in Chapter 2, in studies of social media, there has been a heavy focus on large-scale quantitative analyses of content from social media platforms. This is due to a ‘computational turn’ within the field that has resulted from the increasing availability of big data analytics technology (Fuchs, 2017, p. 39; Latzko-Toth et al., 2016). While computational approaches are useful for identifying networks and trends in what is being communicated and by whom online, they are less suited to understanding experiences, intentions and subjective meaning-making, or to investigating social phenomena in context (Fuchs, 2017, p. 40; Latzko-Toth et al., 2016). That is, quantitative studies may help us understand what is being said about Brexit or other political issues on Facebook, but can provide little insight into what motivates users to produce, consume and circulate ideologies, and engage with political issues there.

The current research project took the position that social meaning cannot be understood through observation alone, but must be interpreted with reference to the meanings attributed by actors themselves (Geertz, 1977). Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 2, discursive acts on social media should not be treated as windows into users’ ‘real’ or ‘true’ sentiments (B. Hogan, 2010). Big-data-based research designs have been criticised for inherent positivist assumptions (Langlois & Elmer, 2013) and for taking a decontextualised approach to social media data that ignores ‘the embeddedness of the

media into society's power structures and social struggles' (Fuchs, 2017, pp. 40–43). In contrast, this research took an interpretive, inductive approach that sought to acknowledge the complex and constructed nature of social phenomena, as well as our inability as researchers to observe social 'facts' independently of their interpretation (May, 2011, p. 10). The aim was to combine an understanding of what users were Sharing on social media with an exploration of why they engaged with such content and what it meant to them. Such questions cannot be answered without speaking to users themselves in order to gain deeper insights into their social worlds and how they interpret them. Using qualitative methods, this research sought to treat social media not as a tool for researching social phenomena, but rather as one crucial element in a complex social system in which social phenomena are constituted.

The study did not seek to produce findings that were generalisable to all Leave-supporting social media users; what is true for one user's habits, motivations and engagement patterns will not be the same for another. Nor did the study seek to determine any form of causality. The value of qualitative data is in its exploratory rather than explanatory power, and the findings of this study are intended to serve as insights into the pro-Leave Facebook world and some of the ways political engagement on Facebook is affecting non-digital-native Leave supporters. That is, the study aimed not to generate a model of pro-Leave political engagement on Facebook, but to explore experiences and meanings to inform a broader understanding of the complex ways in which social media are changing social and political lives.

There has been little qualitative research conducted on social media, particularly with regard to political social media use, and few researchers have attempted to combine observations of behaviour with interpretivist enquiry that seeks to give a voice to the research subjects. Latzko-Toth et al. (2016) have advocated the 'thickening' of data in social media research, particularly through interviews with users regarding their activity, a challenge taken up by a handful of researchers including Schaffar and Thabchumpon (2019), Gangneux (2019), and Duguay (2016). For instance, Schaffar and Thabchumpon (2019) participated in Thai vigilante Facebook groups and combined this with 'quick interviews' with individual group members. However, as Hine (2015, p. 28) has argued, 'prolonged immersive engagement' is necessary in order to understand 'how those Facebook activities are produced and consumed, how they travel beyond

the online location and are embedded in other forms of activity'. No prior examples could be found of appropriate methodologies for gaining a deep and contextualised understanding of political social media use, meaning-making and individual experiences. Therefore it was necessary to develop a novel research design for the project, which is outlined below.

3.3 Sampling and Recruitment

3.3.1 Identification

A total of 15 participants were recruited for the study. This relatively small number of participants enabled the kind of in-depth individual-level analysis described above, in the time frame permitted by the doctoral project. The selection criteria for participants was that they had Publicly Shared⁵ on Facebook more than one Post supporting Leave within the past month; that they were born before the year 1980 (see the definition of 'non-digital-natives' given in Chapter 1); and that they resided in England or Wales.

The reason selection was limited to those who Publicly Shared material was because such activity was the sole way to identify users who were engaging with pro-Leave material on Facebook. Thus the participant group was not necessarily representative of a broader group of users who engaged with similar material without Sharing, or Shared it Privately.

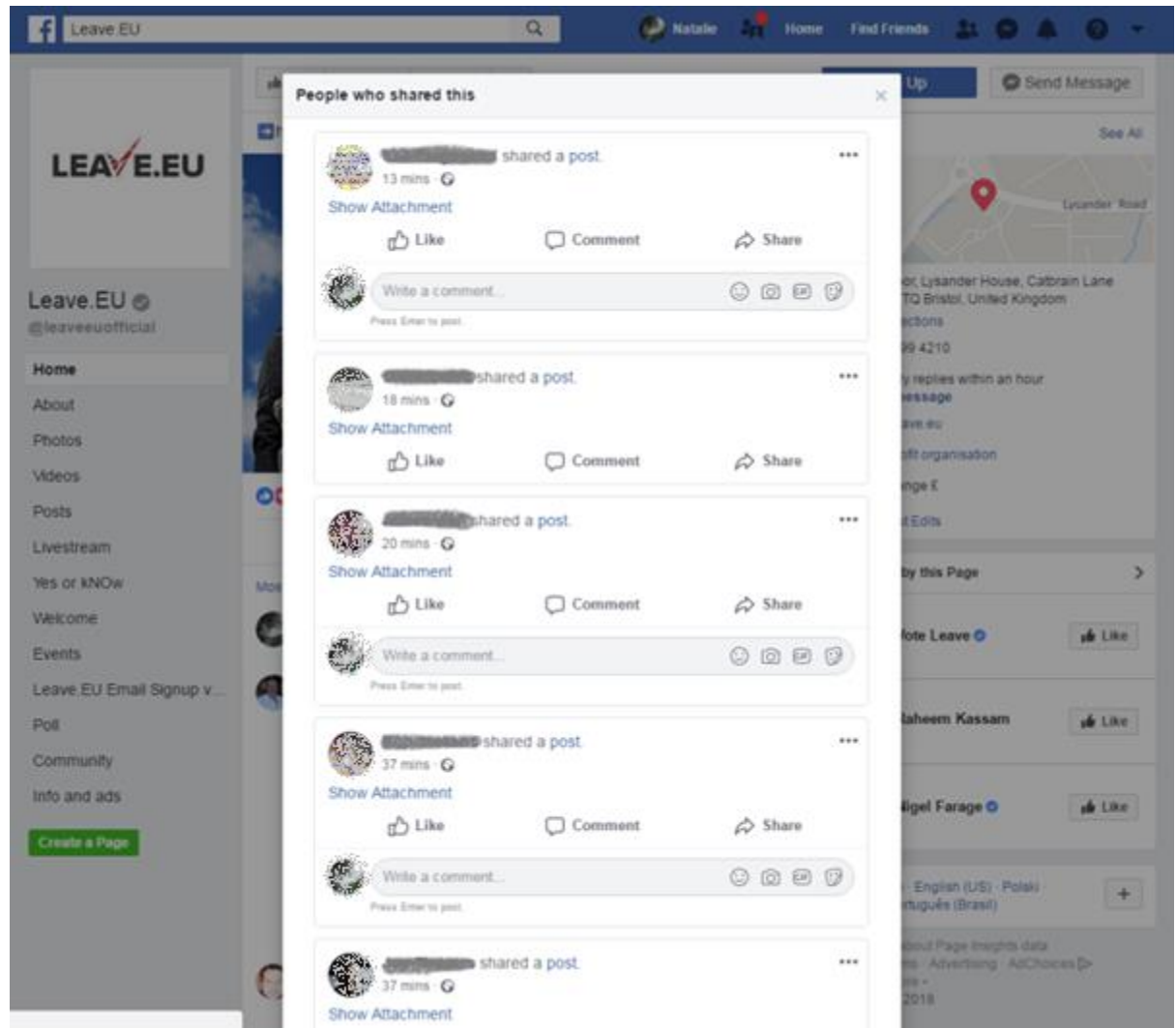
Potential participants were identified by visiting Public pro-Leave Facebook Pages (see Appendix 2), and generating lists of those who had Publicly Shared popular Posts, a function afforded by the Facebook platform (see Figure 1). As not all Facebook users make information about their age and country of residence Publicly visible on their Profile, and given the high average age of Leave supporters, users were considered potential participants as long as no information could be found on their Profile that indicated that they were born on or after 1980, or that they resided outside of England or Wales. These details could then be confirmed after contact was established with those

⁵Publicly Sharing content means that it is visible on a user's Wall to anybody using Facebook.

This is contrasted with Privately Sharing, whereby users can determine who is able to see the Post, for instance all or a selection of their Facebook Friends, or Friends of Friends.

willing to participate. Users whose Public Profile contained explicitly violent material were also excluded from consideration, for reasons of researcher safety.

Figure 1: Identifying potential participants



3.3.2 Recruitment

Those identified as potential participants were contacted via the Messenger function within the Facebook platform with an invitation to participate in the study. Given the generally informal nature of communication on the Facebook platform, the invitation adopted a relatively friendly, though still professional, tone. It explained that the study was for a PhD project on how people use social media to discuss political topics, particularly Brexit. It also indicated from which Page the user's Profile had been found, and what participating in the study would involve. In order to avoid being falsely identified by the platform's security algorithms as 'spam', it was necessary to vary the

wording of the invitation slightly for each potential participant. However, the overall content and tone of the message remained consistent. Details of the research context were limited, so as to avoid preconceptions (or misconceptions) about the purpose of the research that may bias participants' responses or discourage users from participating altogether. The message simply made reference to changes in the way people discuss political issues thanks to social media and the recently topical nature of this.

A total of 287 users were contacted between 10 July 2018 and 18 January 2019. This elicited responses from 37 users, 15 of whom eventually went on to participate in the study. It became necessary to contact a large number of users in order to elicit responses. Although it is possible to send multiple messages to Facebook users without being their Friend on the platform, these messages take the form of Message Requests, stored in a separate inbox which is less immediately visible to the user. For this reason, potential participants who had not responded to the invitation message after several days were sent a follow-up message, drawing their attention to the original invitation, and reiterating that their participation would be greatly valued. However, for 195 of the users contacted, Facebook indicated that both the original message and the follow up message had been sent but not 'read'. I kept track of those contacted and their responses using a password protected spreadsheet stored on encrypted media.

The message was sent from a Facebook account used solely for this research project. The password for this account was known only to me. The account was registered under my name and contained a single photograph of myself, taken from a distance. The only personal details provided were my affiliation with the University of Manchester and city of origin (Brisbane, Australia). On a social media platform where users tend to populate their Profiles with personal photographs along with numerous details about their preferences, friends, family or romantic relationships, I was aware that this minimalistic Profile may serve as a barrier to gaining the trust of potential participants. Indeed, one participant gave this as a reason for initially being sceptical about participating (Lawrence). Furthermore, choosing not to use my personal Facebook account or include personal content in my Profile, while many details of my participants' personal lives, opinions and interests would be visible to me, could be considered to exacerbate the researcher-researched power differential (although such a disparity in personal disclosure arguably exists in most other forms of qualitative research).

However, there were two primary reasons for taking this approach. The first was a simple issue of researcher safety (Kamp et al., 2019). Given the amount of abuse that social media activity can attract (Duggan, 2017), particularly in discussions of such a highly political nature, I was conscious of the potential for being targeted by ‘trolls’ or simply by angry users (Marwick et al., 2016). Content uploaded online has the potential to endure far beyond its deletion by the author, a fact which is prompting increasing numbers of users to hide or remove personal content from their social media Profiles. Furthermore, for reasons of researcher positionality (which is discussed in 3.6 below), I decided it more ethical to reduce my personal involvement and closeness to potential participants and their social media milieu. While it is never possible to fully separate ourselves from relationships of trust and friendship during interactions with participants, social media offers a greater level of control over self-presentation (B. Hogan, 2010) and thus an opportunity to foster a clearer separation between personal and professional personas.

Once a user agreed to participate in the study, a Friend Request was sent. In order to protect participant anonymity, it was necessary to adjust the privacy settings on my Facebook Profile to hide my Friends List from others. On occasion I received Friend Requests from users who I had not contacted. Such requests were accepted where there appeared to be potential to invite these users to participate, and they too were sent the recruitment message. If these users eventually did not agree to participate in the study, their Facebook activity was not observed, but they were not removed as Friends. This is because, as with offline qualitative research, the researcher cannot know when a contact might prove an important gateway to segments of a community.

As potential participants were often difficult to reach, a snowballing method of recruitment was also used. I encouraged each participant to tell their friends about the research and pass on my details if they were interested in participating. One participant, Eileen, who has a particularly large number of followers on her Page, also agreed to Post a short recruitment advertisement for me there. In total, snowball sampling yielded three research participants.

I also considered Posting recruitment advertisements on Facebook Pages or Groups in order to reach larger numbers of potential participants. However, I decided against this. The group I was trying to reach were likely to be wary of researchers if they considered

them part of the ‘liberal elite’ (Toscano, 2019, p. 6), whom the narratives they were sharing posited as enemies. Furthermore, some of the more active Followers, members or administrators of these Pages or Groups may have viewed research as a threat to the movement they were trying to create (Kriesi, 1992, p. 197). If antagonism towards the research was expressed in such a public forum (and potentially Shared more widely among this milieu) it risked jeopardising my rapport with potential as well as existing participants.

Men appeared to represent a much larger proportion of the users Publicly Sharing the pro-Leave Posts from which I recruited, and I thus contacted far more users who could be identified from their Profile as men (n=258) than women (n=82). However, in line with general trends in social research recruitment (Robinson, 2014), it was particularly difficult to elicit positive responses from male users. As a result, of the first six participants recruited, only one was male. To ameliorate this imbalance, during the later stages of recruitment I actively targeted male users.

3.3.3 Final participant group

The final cohort of participants consisted of 15 individuals: seven women and eight men. Participants were given pseudonyms from the point of agreeing to participate in the research, and basic details about each were stored in a password-protected spreadsheet on encrypted media. Characteristics of each participant are given in Table 1 below.

Participants’ ages varied from early 40s to early 70s. They lived in a variety of locations across England and Wales and had diverse employment statuses and histories. Six out of the 15 participants were retired, two were currently unemployed or on long-term health leave from work, three were self-employed, and one was a full-time stay-at-home carer. Consequently, the cohort included many individuals who spent a large proportion of their time at home, which may have contributed to the time they spent on social media. Although participants were not specifically asked to self-identify their social class, a range of social classes appear to be represented. A number of participants explicitly referred to their working-class identities during interviews, while others had worked in administrative or managerial roles, or owned more than one property, suggesting a middle-class or upper-middle-class status was likely.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age	Location	Occupation
Audrey	F	50s	Northwest England	Care support worker
Beatrice	F	60s	North Wales	Retired (special needs teacher)
Carl	M	53	Northwest England	Self-employed (van driver)
Deborah	F	50s	Northwest England	Retired (various)
Eileen	F	61	Northwest England	Self-employed (real-estate)
Fred	M	60s	Northeast England	Retired (administrative)
George	M	73	Northeast England	Retired (civil servant)
Helen	F	57	West Midlands	Full-time carer for family member
Isaac	M	50s	Northwest England	Care worker, elderly home (ex-military)
Jessica	F	40s	London	Unemployed (previously self-employed- removals)
Kirk	M	67	London	Self-employed (renovations)
Lawrence	M	40s	West Midlands	Steel worker
Mark	M	55	Yorkshire	Maths teacher
Neil	M	69	South Wales	Retired (head teacher)
Olivia	F	57	Southeast England	Self-employed (real-estate)

Thirteen of the participants lived in England and two in Wales. While both of the Wales-based participants were originally from Wales, one had spent most of her life living in Northwest England before retiring to a different part of Wales to that from which her family had originated. Although a handful of those contacted had Facebook Profiles suggesting they were of an ethnic minority background, none of these users agreed to participate in the study, and no deliberate attempt was made to increase the ethnic diversity of the cohort. Consequently, all of the participants in the final cohort were white British, although one participant (Deborah) described herself as having unknown

ancestry and having been ‘very dark’ as a child. Many of the participants had spent extended periods of time overseas, particularly in South Africa or the United States.

3.3.4 Informed consent

There are still many unresolved issues surrounding the ethics of social media research, particularly on Facebook (Schaffar & Thabchumpon, 2019, p. 133). As Hine (2011, p. 3) asserts, ‘simply because we can access data does not mean it is ethically available for research purposes’. Researchers have debated what is public (versus private) information online, and whether consent is required to collect this (McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 1). Large-scale studies using Twitter in particular (e.g. Bartlett et al., 2014; Chaudhry, 2016a, 2016b; Froio & Ganesh, 2019) have followed the early positions of scholars like Walther (2002) and Kitchin (2009) that information that is publicly available on the internet does not require consent to use for research because authors have already relinquished their right to privacy by publishing such information. Furthermore, in the case of Twitter, the platform’s user agreement makes explicit that users relinquish this right (Twitter, Inc., 2020).

However, the use of Facebook content is more problematic. Unlike Twitter, where people interact more with strangers or acquaintances (Chen, 2011), Facebook is used more often to maintain existing relationships, and users share large amounts of personal information with ‘Friends’ rather than ‘Followers’ (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010). Furthermore, while Twitter is normally assumed to be a forum for public announcements and discussion (Murthy, 2012), and therefore users can in many scenarios ‘reasonably expect to be observed by strangers’ (BPS, 2007, p. 3; in BSA, 2017, p. 6), Facebook users are given the ability to ‘micro-manage’ the level of public visibility of each piece of content they Post, making the boundary between private and public much more complicated for users to navigate. Research has also found evidence of users’ misconceptions about the public visibility of their Profiles (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Even if social media users are Posting content ‘Publicly’, they may not be aware that it could potentially be used for research.

Scholars like Schaffar and Thabchumpon (2019) have derived their approach to consent from an analogy with the difference between public and private meetings offline. They maintain that Private Groups and Pages are akin to private (offline) meetings, which

would be unethical to secretly record. In contrast, Public Groups and Posts, like public meetings, are open to (unconsented) observation and study. I do not accept the validity of this comparison. A huge amount of personal identifying information becomes immediately available to researchers on social media that would not be available to an observer of an offline public meeting (Schaffar & Thabchumpon, 2019, p. 133). Furthermore, the permanency of online footprints, combined with the power of search engines and the availability of academic works online, create unique potential for users to be identified (McKee & Porter, 2009, pp. 106–107). Assuming that data collection online is simply comparable to that in offline environments ignores the uniqueness of the online research context that has underpinned many years of ethical discussions over privacy and power (e.g. Fuchs, 2012).

Fuchs (2018b) has argued that in cases of ‘negative’ online social movements and ideologies, including nationalism or racism, it is neither possible nor safe to ask users to provide consent for their Posts to be used in research, and indeed conducted his critical discourse analysis of Facebook Comments around Trump and Brexit on this basis (Fuchs, 2018a). However, close-up (i.e. interactive), consent-based research can and has been done (offline) with even the most radical and antagonistic groups, including the EDL in the UK (e.g. Pilkington, 2016; Busher, 2016) and White supremacists in the US (Simi & Futrell, 2015). Furthermore, simply Sharing ‘problematic’ content on social media involves little cost or risk and thus is not an absolute indication that an individual is strongly invested in hateful ideologies. That is, an individual who Posts, for example, nationalist content, is not necessarily a committed nationalist as Fuchs implies. While I received a handful of hostile reactions to my recruitment message, overall my study demonstrated that obtaining consent from individuals engaged with antagonistic and exclusionary content is possible, particularly if we explain our intention to observe equitably, report fairly, and to understand rather than vilify.

Thus, while acknowledging that there is no clear consensus on the issue, this research took the position that it is more ethical to obtain users’ consent before collecting data about the content they Post on Facebook. This is particularly the case when such data collection is qualitative, comprehensive, and prolonged, making it potentially more invasive for those being observed. Participants were provided with a Participant

Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form electronically via Facebook's Messenger function following the conclusion of the initial interview, and this made explicit which data would and would not be collected. The contents of the PIS were also explained to participants in plain terms during the introductory section of the interview (including their right to withdraw from the research) before verbal agreement was received to begin recording the interview. The electronic PIS and consent form were accompanied by a message reminding participants to check the PIS to ensure they were happy with all of the contents before signing and returning the consent form. Most participants returned the form via Messenger, but one form was returned as a hard copy in person. These forms were stored in password-protected files on encrypted media and in a locked cabinet.

3.4 Data collection

In order to provide the kind of situated insights desired and to understand Facebook in relation to participants' lived experiences, I developed a novel research methodology which was both qualitative and immersive, and which gave a voice to the users being researched. Participants were interviewed, their Facebook Wall observed for a substantial period, and then interviewed again. The procedure I undertook is described below.

3.4.1 Interview method

Each participant participated in both an initial interview and a follow-up interview, with the Facebook observations described in 3.4.2 occurring in between these. A total of 30 interviews yielded 43 hours and 29 minutes of interview data. Initial interviews were conducted between 18 July 2018 and 30 January 2019, and follow-up interviews between 19 November 2018 and 15 May 2019. Interviews were recorded using a standard dictaphone device, and audio files were transferred within 24 hours to password-protected encrypted media. The interview recordings ranged in length from 33 minutes to 149 minutes. Details of each interview are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Interview details

Participant	Int #	Date	Time	Length	Mode	Location
Audrey	1	18/7/2018	21:00	58:17	Video	Facebook
	2	15/5/2019	20:15	52:32	Video	Facebook
Beatrice	1	23/7/2018	11:00	60:01	Video	Facebook
	2	1/12/2018	15:00	104:55	Face-to-face	Beatrice's home
Carl	1	24/7/2018	12:00	48:17	Voice	Facebook
	2	19/11/2018	14:30	91:18	Face-to-face	Café
Deborah	1	25/7/2018	11:00	65:14	Face-to-face	Deborah's home
	2	19/11/2018	11:00	90:26	Face-to-face	Deborah's home
Eileen	1	15/8/2018	11:30	98:41	Video	Facebook
	2	4/12/2018	10:00	149:17	Video	Facebook
Fred	1	6/9/2018	14:00	52:30	Video	Facebook
	2	17/12/2018	14:00	62:34	Face-to-face	Pub
George	1	7/9/2018	10:00	33:31	Video	Facebook
	2	17/12/2018	10:30	66:38	Face-to-face	Café
Helen	1	13/9/2018	21:00	59:58	Voice	Facebook
	2	22/1/2019	12:00	139:31	Face-to-face	Pub
Isaac	1	12/10/2018	13:00	65:15	Video	Facebook
	2	16/1/2019	10:00	105:16	Face-to-face	Isaac's home
Jessica	1	7/1/2019	21:00	124:07	Voice	Facebook
	2	2/3/2019	15:00	57:03	Face-to-face	Café
Kirk	1	15/1/2019	10:30	81:12	Voice	Phone
	2	16/3/2019	12:00	143:19	Face-to-face	Bar
Lawrence	1	21/1/2019	17:00	52:23	Video	Facebook
	2	1/5/2019	17:30	105:38	Video	Facebook
Mark	1	25/1/2019	11:00	69:27	Face-to-face	Café
	2	7/3/2019	11:00	145:05	Face-to-face	Mark's home
Neil	1	29/1/2019	10:00	89:15	Voice	Facebook

	2	14/4/2019	14:00	117:00	Face-to-face	Café
Olivia	1	30/1/2019	10:00	101:13	Voice	Facebook
	2	20/3/2019	17:00	119:35	Face-to-face	Ms O's home

For both the initial and follow-up interview, participants were given the option to be interviewed in the manner they preferred: face-to-face, through video or voice chat online, or over the phone. However, when initially contacting participants, I suggested we first speak over video or voice chat so that I could simultaneously explain the research and they could decide whether or not to participate. Conversely, I encouraged participants to meet me face-to-face for the follow-up interview to make it easier for me to show them some of their Facebook Posts as discussion prompts. In line with participants' wishes, two of the initial and 12 of the follow-up interviews were conducted face-to-face. These face-to-face interviews took place in participants' homes or in public spaces such as pubs or cafés. The remaining interviews were conducted using Facebook's video chat or voice chat function (or in the case of one interview, over the phone). As Waldner and Dobratz (2019, p. 44) note, while the use of multiple methods of interviewing may not be ideal for ruling out the possibility that differences in findings are not a result of this variation, such flexible strategies are sometimes necessary to reach reticent groups. Allowing participants to choose the interview method most convenient or comfortable for them particularly assisted me in arranging interviews with those who were busier or more reluctant.

Scholars like O'Connor et al. (2008) and Gray et al. (2020) have noted that interviews conducted using video or voice technology create different research conditions to those conducted face-to-face. Practically and methodologically there are both advantages and disadvantages to interviewing participants virtually. By eliminating the need to travel, online interviews reduce the financial cost and environmental impact of a research project. This also translates into a reduced burden on participants. The ability to participate in an interview in the comfort of one's home, without the need to travel to meet the researcher or to invite the researcher into their personal space, means that a participant's time and effort are not unnecessarily consumed by the interview, and their privacy not invaded (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hanna, 2012). Online interviews also carry health and safety benefits, as they reduce the risk to both the participant and the

researcher (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). All of these benefits were reaped in the current project. Furthermore, the use of the Facebook platform itself to conduct the interviews created a seamless process in which it was not necessary to ask participants to use any additional software (e.g. Skype) with which they may not be familiar. This also removed the need for my participants (or myself) to disclose any additional contact details, which would have created new privacy concerns. As noted above, offering to reduce the burden of participating in the initial interview may well have contributed to the willingness of people to participate in the research and thus aided recruitment.

However, some practitioners have also questioned to what extent voice- or video-based interviewing can really facilitate effective in-depth qualitative interviews (Seitz, 2016, p. 230). Of course there are the obvious difficulties that may arise conducting voice- or video-based interviews online, such as occasional poor or dropped connection and the potential presence of inaudible segments (ibid, pp. 230-231). Although connection and audio quality were mostly good, such disruptions did occur on occasion. For one interview in particular this significantly affected the audio recording, but it should be noted that some of the poorest quality recordings for the current study were from interviews in public places due to background noise. This is something which can easily be eliminated in online interviewing, particularly if both parties are at home.

The more serious concern with this method, however, is whether or not it may affect rapport between the participant and the researcher (Seitz, 2016, p. 229; Weller, 2017). Although it should be noted that building rapport is not always considered necessary, desirable or ethical when researching contentious politics (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002; Smyth & Mitchell, 2008) (this is discussed further in 3.6), a strong relationship of trust with the researcher is said to encourage participants to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences openly and at length (Weiss, 1995), in turn facilitating our ability to understand participants' way of making sense of the world (K. Yilmaz, 2013, p. 313). Unlike face-to-face interviews, interviews conducted using video-based technology online generally only allow users' faces and part of their upper bodies to be seen, meaning that some body language is lost. Additionally, video is not always clear enough for the finer details of facial expressions to be garnered. On the other hand, where voice alone is used for the interview, all non-verbal cues aside from intonation are also lost. I tried to mitigate this by engaging in rapport-building small talk at the start of each

interview and using active listening techniques such as nodding, smiling or making vocal indications that I was paying attention to what participants were saying.

Potential interruptions caused by the problems with connection mentioned above, in addition to being practical barriers, can also disrupt the flow of the interview and the creation of rapport (Seitz, 2016, p. 230). Distraction and disruption can also arise where the respondent is participating in the virtual interview from their home or work environment (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014, p. 609). However, the longest disruption I experienced in the current study was actually during a face-to-face interview, when the participant left the living room to take a mobile phone call. Conversely, in a number of online interviews participants politely ignored mobile phone calls, seeming to feel obliged to give the online appointment their full attention.

Of course, when it comes to building rapport and encouraging openness, what is a more comfortable setting for one participant will not be the same for another. For introverts in particular, online interviews may be less stressful than face-to-face interviews and thus elicit more open responses (Orchard & Fullwood, 2010; Seitz, 2016, pp. 232–233). Some have even suggested that the difference in rapport between online and face-to-face interviews does not affect the quality of the conversation (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014, p. 610). As those who Publicly and regularly Shared their views on social media, many of my participants were happy to speak openly and at length over video- or voice-chat. While for some participants meeting in person and/or visiting their homes admittedly gave me valuable insight into their lifeworld, for other (particularly male) participants the more intimate the interview situation the more uncomfortable both parties became.

The interview format was semi-structured to allow participants to speak freely about their experiences, the issues that mattered to them, and their own interpretations of these (Byrne, 2004; Skinner, 2012, pp. 8–9). This complemented the inductive and interpretivist approach of the research (King & Horrocks, 2010; Skinner, 2012, p. 23). In the initial interview, participants were asked general questions about their use of Facebook and other social media, including when and why they began using Facebook; whether their usage had changed since; when, with what device and how often they accessed it; their experiences of conflict on social media; whether they discussed what they had seen on social media with friends or family offline; and whether their social

media activity had ever led them to establish or indeed break connections with people offline (see Appendix 3). They were also asked their views on things like the effect of social media on society, and censorship (e.g. temporary and permanent bans on certain accounts and removal of controversial content). The mean time of these interviews was 71 minutes.

The follow-up interviews generally began by giving participants an opportunity to identify one or two of the key issues they had been engaging with on Facebook since their last interview and discuss why these were important to them. I next asked participants specific questions about the kinds of content I had observed them Sharing and the sources they had Shared from. Participants were then shown a handful of their own Posts that I had selected, one by one as prompts, and asked why they had considered this content important enough to Share and their thoughts on it (however, for two participants there was insufficient time to move to this section of the interview). These Posts were not selected systematically, nor were participants afforded the opportunity to justify each of the Posts they had made. Instead, I selected Posts for which participants' Posting motivation was less clear, to prompt discussion and reveal new information about participants' views or social media usage in an inductive manner. Similar to Gangneux (2019), I found that the use of social media 'traces' as prompts was rarely effective in eliciting specific recollections of behaviour or motivations, but rather it encouraged participants to talk around their views and behaviour through the tangible examples. In this interview participants were also asked some more political questions, such as whether they considered themselves members of a 'community' or movement on Facebook, who they would like to see running the country, or what they considered to be the outlook for Brexit going forward (see Appendix 3). In some cases, questions that were not able to be asked in the initial interview were asked in the follow-up interview, or content planned for the follow-up interview was covered organically in discussion in the initial interview. Follow-up interviews tended to be longer than initial interviews, with the mean interview time being 103 minutes.

3.4.2 Facebook observations

Between the initial and follow-up interviews, each participant's Facebook Wall was observed for a period of one month. The observations for each participant began the day after their initial interview and occurred between 28 July 2018 and 28 February

2019. The reason one month was set as the duration of the observation period was because the majority of participants Posted between ten and 40 items each day, meaning that one month of observations would yield several hundred items of data for each participant. A longer time period would render manual data collection unmanageable. This period was also long enough for multiple Brexit-related political news stories to break, be discussed, and be forgotten on Facebook, providing a rich variety of themes. The observations were deliberately not synchronised across the 15 participants, to allow my understanding of the field to develop iteratively and continuously inform my approach to the interviews and observations throughout the inductive project. Furthermore, within the drawn-out political ‘story’ of the post-referendum negotiation process, no single month was particularly significant or worthy of isolated observation over any other. Thus, rather than select one month in which to observe all participants, these observations were allowed to span an extended period of ‘fieldwork’. This also permitted follow-up interviews for each participant to take place as soon after the initial interview and observation period as possible, minimising the length of the participation period, and making the content discussed in follow-up interviews easier for participants to recall.

Only those Posts that each participant had Posted themselves on their own Wall were observed; Posts by others to a participant’s Wall were ignored, as was any content participants Posted anywhere other than their own Wall. While tools such as CrowdTangle can be used to generate data on certain Facebook Pages and Posts, there is currently no tool available for researchers to automatically download the content of another individual’s Facebook Posts from their (personal) Wall. Therefore, manual data collection was necessary to create a record to retain for later analysis. While this was time-consuming compared with automated collection of ‘big data’, it had the advantage of facilitating my immersion in the research environment and deep engagement with the data (Latzko-Toth et al., 2016, p. 211); the decision to do so was based on compatibility with the research question and objectives, rather than convenience. Although some scholars have collected Facebook data in the form of screenshots (e.g. Schaffar & Thabchumpon, 2019), for the current study information about each Post was logged in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This enabled me to take notes alongside the data and later to perform cross-sectional sorting and searching, using for example the ‘filter’ function. The enduring nature of content on the platform meant that there was

still the possibility of viewing Posts in their original form and context if required (with the exception of content that might be removed). The fields of data collected are shown in Table 3. Data from a total of 3693 Posts were recorded. Images contained in the Posts (except where these were personal photographs) were downloaded and stored, and the text included on images (e.g. in ‘meme’-style Posts) manually typed out. I followed Hine’s (2015, p. 24) holistic and adaptive approach to online ethnography. Although Facebook was used as a starting point, I followed links Posted to other sites, and read, watched or otherwise examined the content there, deepening my understanding of the context of participants’ online political engagement.

Table 3: Facebook data items

Item	Description
Date	The date the participant Posted the content
Type	The type of Post, e.g. image, video, news item, ‘blog’ or alternative news item, text-based (original or Shared from elsewhere), other link, etc.
URL	The web address of the content, where applicable
Facebook source	The Page, Group or user type from which the participant Shared the content, where applicable
Website	The name of the external website, e.g. of a newspaper, blog or video streaming site, where applicable
Title	The title of the news article, blog article or video, where applicable
Post text	The text included in the Post by the original user, Page or Group from which the participant Shared the content, where applicable
Original Comment	The text added by the participant themselves
Image text	Any relevant text within an image
Repeat content	Indicated whether the participant had Posted the same content multiple times
Themes	A preliminary list of themes present in the content
Notes	Any other notes on the content, particularly the content of videos and news or blog articles, and the immediate political context at the time of Posting

Images contained in the Posts were also downloaded and stored on encrypted media in folders labelled with the participant's pseudonym and the date they were Posted. However, for ethical reasons, photographs of participants and their family members were not downloaded. I also chose not to download or store any photographs of individuals which were Posted alongside unofficial and unverified 'vigilante' claims, e.g. calls by Facebook accounts not officially associated with the police to find, capture or publicly shame individuals who were accused of committing crimes. This was because, with no way to verify whether these accusations were true, such photos were in essence photographs of individuals' faces taken and circulated without their permission and with malicious intent.

Videos and web page content were not downloaded, nor was the content of videos transcribed, because the large volume of content being Posted rendered this unviable within the limited time frame. However, I viewed each of these and made notes about relevant aspects of their content. Noting the associated URLs enabled me to return to them during analysis as required.

Where the source of a Facebook Post was another user, information was not collected about their username, unless the user had explicitly stated on their Profile that they were a 'Journalist', 'Politician', 'Public Figure' or other public personality. Instead, users were identified as either a 'Facebook Friend' of the participant or 'Other Facebook user'. This was to protect the identities of users who had not consented to having data about their activity collected.

Data about reactions to participants' Posts, such as Likes or Comments, were not collected. This was partly because such content was outside the scope of the research questions, which were not concerned with user-to-user interactions or relationships on the platform. Furthermore, as some Posts elicited a large number of Comments of varying length, this would have yielded a huge volume of data that could not have been analysed within the timeframe. However, this decision was also on the same ethical grounds as stated above: those Facebook users registering their Reactions or leaving Comments had not given consent for data about this to be collected. Comments on Posts are particularly problematic, as there may be little awareness of whether or not the content of the Comment will be visible outside the user's own list of Friends or the Friends of the author of the original Post. Thus, even where such Comments were

visible Publicly, I did not take the position that they were ‘fair game’ for collection and analysis without explicit consent.

During the observations, I adopted a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ approach whereby I did not intervene or participate in any way, including Reacting to or Commenting on participants’ Posts, Posting on participants’ Facebook Walls, or Sharing participants’ Posts or any other content to my own Wall or anywhere else. As well as to avoid ethical issues of positionality (discussed in 3.6), the intention was to avoid any ‘Hawthorne effect’ that might arise from reminding participants that I was watching. Inevitably, as with any consent-based observational methods, participants could be expected at times to have been aware that I was observing them. However, refraining from intervening was an opportunity to limit this awareness. Another reason this fly-on-the-wall approach was taken was that as Facebook continued to update its ‘Community Standards’ to expand the range of prohibited content on the platform, engaging with some forms of content could have put the research account at risk of temporary ban or permanent removal.

Two of my participants did fall foul of such regulations during the research period, and while one who received a temporary ban (Eileen) was able to switch to using her ‘back-up’ account and gave me permission to observe this instead, another participant (Olivia) unfortunately had her sole Facebook account permanently removed. This meant that I was unable to view Olivia’s Wall and complete observations of her Facebook activity. However, she gave me permission to observe her Posting activity on other social media platforms, where she had also been Sharing content. Of the platforms she was using, Wake Up UK was deemed to be the most similar to Facebook in interface, and thus became the data source for the missing period of data for Olivia. However, it should be noted that while Olivia said that she tended to Post much of the same content across multiple platforms, she also stated that there was some content she would Share on other platforms but not on Facebook, as she was conscious this might carry a higher risk of being banned. Furthermore, the fact that Wake Up UK has a much smaller user base than Facebook could have affected what Olivia decided to Post there. Thus, it cannot be said that what I observed Olivia Share on Wake Up UK was equivalent to what she would have Shared on Facebook. However, as is outlined below, the data collected from Facebook observations were not the subject of systematic analysis,

precluding the need to consider issues of comparability. More importantly, Olivia's permanent ban gave us a rich stimulus for discussion in her follow-up interview, of her views around Facebook's Community Standards as well as the differences in her behaviour on different social media platforms, thus contributing to, rather than impeding, my understanding of what using Facebook and other social media meant to her.

3.5 Analysis method

While many recent studies have focused on analysing social media content, in this study interview data were the primary basis of analysis. This was owing to the interpretivist approach described above, which gives primacy in social enquiry to the meaning attributed by actors to their own actions (Geertz, 1977). Interview transcripts were transcribed by myself and coded thematically using the software NVivo. Thematic analysis is used for detecting salient trends in qualitative data (Guest et al., 2012) and organising them in a way that is systematic (Nowell et al., 2017) yet flexible enough to allow the researcher to adapt it to the specificities of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the method enables the 'identifying and describing [of] both implicit and explicit ideas within the data' (Guest et al., 2012, p. 10), it has been considered 'the most useful in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data set' (ibid, p. 11). However, it is not a method in which themes are allowed to 'emerge' passively as 'truths' that pre-exist within the data; rather, it is an active, reflexive and interpretive process suited to interpretivist epistemologies (Braun & Clarke, 2019). For all of these reasons thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the interview data for the current study. Through an iterative process that took into account existing theoretical understandings (Tracy, 2012, p. 184) as well as insights from the Facebook observations, the coding and analysis was conducted separately for each of the following areas, selected in order to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 1:

- 1) Characteristics and effects of participants' social media use
- 2) Narratives employed by participants to account for their political positions
- 3) Participants' attitudes towards knowledge

4) Narratives around and expressions of emotion and affect

For each of these areas, thematic codes were developed from immersion in the transcript data, and were re-evaluated after the first two interviews were coded, producing a hierarchical coding schema to organise the themes into groups and sub-groups.

The Facebook observations were not analysed systematically but were instead largely used to complement the interview data, akin to the use of field notes in ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, pp. 141–147). They provided crucial insights and contextualised my understanding of participants' milieus. Firstly, this enabled me to tailor the questions in the follow-up interviews to probe deeper into views and behaviours that were particular to each participant. Secondly, it allowed me to consider where the narratives provided by participants in the interviews overlapped with (or contradicted) the content I had seen them Share. Where examples of Posts are included in the analysis in the following chapters, the date of the Post is not reported, to ensure the anonymity of the participants is protected.

3.6 Researcher positionality

While a number of ethical issues have been touched upon above, given the polarising political nature of the topic at hand, there is a need to address the issue of researcher positionality in particular. Although all qualitative researchers need to reflect on their position vis-à-vis their research subjects, there are particular issues to account for when doing research with groups or individuals whose ideology might be considered problematic or 'distasteful' to the research community, or in opposition to the views or values of the researcher herself (Esseveld & Eyerman, 1992, p. 217). The task of researching a group of vocal Brexiteers in the current political climate was not straightforward, and it is important to acknowledge how my own personal views and values may have affected the research.

Although support for the United Kingdom leaving the European Union in and of itself should not be treated by researchers as damaging or wrong, it was evident from the early recruitment stages that some of the views expressed by participants and those in their milieu were hateful towards or demonising of minority groups and thus harmful to these groups and to society. One of the concerns that has been expressed within the

social sciences about conducting close-up research with such participants is the potential for such research to legitimise these ideologies. This is not only due to the increased visibility that reports of research findings affords them (Pilkington, 2019, p. 25), but also because the mere fact of being the focus of ‘scientific’ research might lead participants to affirm the legitimacy of their views, concerns, and related movements in which they may become involved (Esseveld & Eyerman, 1992, p. 230). Indeed, one participant (Mark), reflecting upon conclusion of the follow-up interview, said that it had made him feel good to be involved in the research, and the fact that someone wanted to research him had been somewhat empowering. Furthermore, I faced an ethical dilemma regarding whether some of my lines of questioning had led some participants to consider more seriously certain aspects of the movement they had not been engaged with before.

However, as has been acknowledged by scholars like (Waldner & Dobratz, 2019, p. 54), understanding harmful ideologies and the way they appeal to people is an essential prerequisite for counteracting them. We cannot completely eliminate such potential for legitimisation without abandoning this enquiry altogether, which arguably would be a more harmful outcome. Mark’s comment also alluded to a (perceived) lack of listening across ideological boundaries, something which is arguably essential to repairing the divisions that have been engendered by the fallout of Brexit (Hobolt et al., 2020, see 2.4.1) and which cannot be neglected if the 48% intend to cohabit in Britain with the 52% going forward.

There is also an assumption among some social scientists, given the hermeneutic turn and developments in feminist scholarship, that conducting qualitative research necessitates developing close relationships and empathy with participants in order to produce meaningful intersubjective accounts of their lifeworlds (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002, pp. 124–125; K. Yilmaz, 2013). Developing such relationships would clearly be ethically problematic if the group being researched advocates ideologies harmful to society. However, Esseveld and Eyerman (1992, p. 232) argue that research with these groups is conducted under very different conditions, and thus the same standards should not be imposed. In fact, as Pilkington (2019) has argued, despite many scholars choosing to conduct research with groups with whom they themselves agree or identify, such political alignment is not a requirement of research. It is not necessary to reject an

objective divide between researcher and researched (Juris, 2007, p. 165); one may research a group in order to understand them without ‘siding’ with them or accepting their worldview (Pilkington, 2019; Waldner & Dobratz, 2019, p. 54).

However, doing close-up research into ‘objectionable’ ideologies brings difficulties in terms of negotiating relationships with participants throughout the research practice. To be clear, my personal political views have always been influenced by a desire to combat racism and discrimination, and the fear-mongering approach towards immigration taken by the Leave campaign was without a doubt the deciding factor in my choice to vote Remain. Not only my views on issues like diversity and race relations, but also my position regarding other liberal issues (such as passivism, transgender rights and socialist economic policies) differed from those expressed by some of my participants. However, my knowledge of the European Union itself was limited before beginning this research, and having grown up in Australia, my position on the UK’s membership in the European Union was neither fixed nor founded in any strong conviction beyond those aspects mentioned above. I sought to approach the research with an open mind, acknowledging that the views I held on this issue were likely to be the product of my own online (personal and academic) ‘filter bubble’. Furthermore, there was ‘common ground’ to be found with participants, on issues like elitism and corruption. Like Waldner and Dobratz (2019, pp. 54–55), I sought to view my participants as ‘complex and complicated’ human beings who were more than the sum of some of the ideologies they subscribed to or reproduced. Despite differences in views, I aim in this thesis to represent my participants, their concerns and their behaviour, not only critically but fairly and accurately.

A major concern when conducting research with participants whose values we may disagree with regards our ethical obligation to participants (K. Blee, 2007, p. 125). Specifically, this is the question of to what degree researchers should be honest and open with their participants about their own values and research agenda. Pilkington (2019, p. 25) rejects the claim that by building rapport with participants with whom we disagree researchers are essentially ‘faking’ friendship and thus deceiving them. Indeed, such an accusation could be directed at all close-up research, as researchers are always required to build some degree of rapport and trust in order to elicit open responses from participants, despite having to maintain their role as a reasonably objective observer

whose relationship with participants should eventually come to an end (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002, pp. 107–122). However, researchers doing this type of research in particular have noted the dilemmas they have faced in deciding how much of their own views it is necessary to disclose to participants. Additional efforts need to be made to gain participants' trust, given that those involved in right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist mobilisations tend to be particularly distrustful of academics, who they perceive to be part of a liberal elite enemy (K. Blee, 2007, p. 121). I certainly met hostility on occasion in the recruitment process, from one user telling me they had been told to ask if I was 'from the left-wing', to another who spent the better part of an hour with me on Facebook Messenger tirelessly composing a series of lengthy, angry messages explaining why I was part of the problem.

As Waldner and Dobratz (2019) point out, there is no one 'correct' way to approach the issue of exactly how researchers working with those who may subscribe to right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist ideologies should present themselves, their values and their agenda. My approach was not to be deliberately dishonest with participants. The initial invitation message and my verbal explanation of the research made clear to participants that the research sought to understand how older Brexiteers used social media to discuss political topics. When some participants expressed their concern about how they may be represented in the research, particularly the attribution of labels such as 'racist', I was truthful when I assured them that this was not my aim and that my role as a sociologist was to understand 'what was going on'. However, when it came to my own views on topics about which I disagreed with participants, I mostly implemented a strategy of 'deflection' (Waldner & Dobratz, 2019, p. 52). I also removed or made Private much of my online presence, particularly anything pertaining to political views. This was less for the purpose of maintaining rapport than because I did not wish what my participants said in interviews or Posted on Facebook to be tarnished by any 'social desirability effect' that arose from their perceptions of my views. It was important from an epistemological perspective that they felt it was safe and acceptable to be open and honest during the research.

Unlike some researchers who advocate a more transparent approach (e.g. K. Blee, 2002), I did not actively challenge any of the views of my participants during the data gathering. Doing so would not only have potentially driven participants away but drastically

affected the content of the interview data by making participants engage in defensive talk. My person-to-person contact time with participants was limited to two interviews each, and thus it was imperative that this time was spent productively – it could not be squandered creating and resolving conflict between us. Furthermore, for many of my participants, feeling that their concerns had not been listened to or regarded as legitimate was the very reason they were engaging in the activity that was the focus of the study, and they were particularly sensitive about this.

However, unlike Pete Simi (Simi & Futrell, 2009), I never pretended to agree with participants⁶. Like Waldner and Dobratz (2019), I did employ active listening techniques (e.g. nodding) which could have been interpreted by participants as agreement. I also presented myself in a friendly and personable manner and shared some personal details when these came up organically in conversation, but did not make any effort to form personal relationships with participants. Participants rarely sought my views; most seemed to appreciate my attempt at academic neutrality. While I did feel that I was cast in the ‘ally’ role by some participants (e.g. Olivia), others assumed that I was probably on the ‘other side’ (Kirk) – perhaps because of my age or status as a university researcher – or only dared to bring this up after we had completed the follow-up interview (Mark). However, it was notable that many participants seemed eager to justify themselves and their views to me, which yielded rich meaning-making data discussed in Chapter 5.

My status as white and having come from Australia may also have encouraged some participants to assume common ground and subsequently to speak more openly. Indeed, they often spoke with surprising candour about race, migration and Islam, and this is similar to observations made by Foste (2020, p. 8) about their participants. Many commented on my peculiar accent and asked me where I was from, and several subsequently appealed to my Australian heritage when commenting on perceived problems related to (the wrong sort of) immigration, inferring an assumed shared concern between our nations. Interestingly, none of my participants seemed to imply that I was myself an ‘immigrant’, although this may be because I mentioned to most of them that my father was originally from Britain. Aware of the potential for this to

⁶ While this was necessary for Simi for safety reasons, as he was conducting ethnography with a violent group, this was not the case with my study.

contribute to what Applebaum (2010) calls ‘white complicity’, I attempted to remain ‘vigilant’ (Foste, 2020) and carefully refrained from expressing either agreement or disagreement with such claims. While this certainly does not absolve me of responsibility for unintentionally validating racism or creating ‘comfortable’ contexts for such views (ibid), for the above-described reasons I deemed that ‘deflection’ was the only strategy available to me if I was to successfully elicit meaningful responses from participants. Having this option was a privilege that would likely not have been afforded to me had I been phenotypically non-white, or from a non-English speaking or (visibly) Muslim background.

It should also be noted that my position as a woman potentially affected the willingness of users to participate in the study, and/or the content of the interview discussions. Indeed, one participant (Mark) noted that he may not have spoken at such length in the follow-up interview if I had been male or he had considered me particularly unattractive, and another participant (Audrey) used feminine terms of endearment (e.g. ‘chikk’, ‘hun’) when responding to the initial interview request, indicating a potential felt familiarity or fellowship that may not otherwise have been present if I had been male.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the process by which I conducted the research, which involved developing a novel methodology that combined consent-based observations with multiple interviews. A significant portion of these interviews took place virtually, which brought both advantages and disadvantages but I argue was not detrimental to the methodology. Data analysis, conducted thematically, centred on the interview content due to the interpretivist epistemological approach, but Facebook observations, collected and stored manually, were used to contextualise and complement these findings.

The ethical reasons for methodological decisions have also been outlined. In particular, I took the position that Publicly Posted content on Facebook is not necessarily ‘fair-game’ for researchers because of the personal and relational nature of this platform. Furthermore, while I adopted a fly-on-the-wall approach and refrained from participating in participants’ milieus so as not to contribute to the legitimisation of the ideologies in question (or to unnecessarily alert them to my presence), I have

acknowledged the difficulty of researcher positionality in doing close-up research with potentially harmful groups. Although conducting such research may bring undue attention to these groups and ideologies, which risks contributing to their legitimisation or mainstreaming, I have taken the position that such research is necessary in order to understand and combat hateful ideologies. I also balanced this risk with my ethical obligation to participants and adopted a practice of deflection rather than dishonesty with regard to my own views. The results produced by this novel method are outlined in the following three chapters.

4. ‘For what I’m doing, it’s been invaluable’: Facebook use and pro-Leave political engagement

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 demonstrated that social media use has had significant consequences for political life, particularly with regard to the kinds of contentious politics that have been linked to Brexit. However, no studies thus far have attempted to uncover the patterns, motivations and consequences of political social media use of Leave supporters by speaking to them directly. This chapter begins outlining the findings of the thesis by introducing the participants of the study and answering Research Questions 1 and 2, which ask how and why participants used Facebook, and how the way they used it affected their political lives.

While there was great diversity in the behaviours and context around participants’ Facebook use, trends and particularities revealed much about the role of the platform in participants’ engagement with Brexit and a range of related issues. Based on these findings I argue that the logic of the Facebook platform both afforded *and encouraged* participants to become politically engaged in ways that made them feel valuable and in control, within a socio-political context that they experienced as devaluing and disempowering.

The ‘logic’ of Facebook (see 2.2.2) is broadly understood to include elements such as the platform’s architectural affordances, automated nature, and the norms or cultures of interaction that have arisen there. As Costa (2018, p. 3643) demonstrated in her study of Facebook use in Mardin, Turkey, we cannot understand social media use by examining architectural affordances alone; practices of social media use ‘are not predetermined outside of their situated everyday action and habits of usage’. This chapter accordingly focuses on participants’ practices of political engagement on Facebook and the meanings revealed in their narratives of those practices.

I first examine the routes by which participants came to use Facebook for political engagement around Brexit, and the implications of these trajectories for our understanding of social media’s role in individuals becoming engaged with pro-Leave and related right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist content. I then discuss the ways

in which participants used Facebook to find and Share political content, demonstrating how the logic of the Facebook platform – its focus on algorithmically-determined content, role as an alternative news provider, and Sharing culture – shaped the way in which this occurred, and how these practices provided participants with a means to regain some semblance of control. The third section examines how the ability to connect globally on the platform, and the prominence of conflict there, provided participants with a sense of value and validation. I conclude by turning to the offline effects and sustainability of these political engagements within and outside the context of Facebook.

4.2 ‘I am not politically minded’: Trajectories towards political engagement on Facebook

This section looks at the trajectories that brought participants to use Facebook for political engagement and become the ‘pro-Leave Facebook users’ they were when I encountered them. While no two stories were the same, some important similarities emerged, and each participant’s path to engagement provided insights into the ways in which becoming politically engaged can occur on and through Facebook. In particular, participants’ trajectories pointed to the significance of Facebook’s shifting social and political functions, the role of the architectural logics of the platform, and participants’ attitudes and ambivalences toward these. They also demonstrate that participants were not passive ‘dupes’ of social media campaigns, but rather their trajectories were the result of a combination of the content they encountered online and their lived experiences and pre-existing concerns.

While the majority of participants had held Facebook accounts for many years, some since not long after the platform first opened to general registrations in 2006, few had been active users until recently. Many had been reluctant adopters of the technology, and described how a friend or family member had cajoled or encouraged them to open an account (‘got them into it’), or opened the account on their behalf. As Beatrice told me, ‘you get dragged into it eventually (...) you begin to use it and then you become involved’.

Initially most used it to keep in touch with friends or family living overseas or in other parts of the country. As Lawrence, a steel-worker from Norfolk who now lived in the Midlands, told me, ‘Facebook was just the best way of keeping contact with all your

friends and people you've met all over the world'. Importantly, when they started using it, 'it was purely for social interaction with my friends' (Neil, interview 1), and participants noted how they had never 'set my Posts to Public' (Eileen, interview 1) during that period. Then, in more recent years, participants experienced a change in the way they used Facebook: they began to use it to find and Share political information. For some this change had occurred within the last six to 18 months (placing this roughly between 2017 and 2018), while for others it had happened a few years ago, in the period leading up to the referendum. A handful could recall a specific event that had triggered this transition, while for others this had been more of a gradual change. More than half of participants, however, identified that this change took place around the issue of Brexit (Beatrice, Lawrence, Kirk, Mark, Eileen, Helen, Jessica, Fred). Most participants now used the platform intensively, for a number of hours each day, with a focus on political information rather than social interaction. Importantly, many of the participants told me that they had not been particularly interested in politics before this occurred. Beatrice was one participant who was especially clear about this.

A retired special needs teacher in her 60s, Beatrice started using Facebook about five or six years before we met. She told me she got 'dragged into it' as a way of staying in touch with friends in South Africa, where she and her husband had been living several months each year since retirement. One of the first Groups she joined on Facebook was a UKIP Group in her (then) local area in the Northwest of England in the lead-up to the referendum. This was around the time her use of Facebook changed, and at the time of the data collection she was spending several hours each day Posting dozens of items of content around Brexit and Islam. She paused and chuckled before she told me, with no little sense of irony, 'I am not politically minded'. 'In my politics throughout my life', she said, 'I have always, I'm not for one party or another, right? I vote for the party of the time who is best answering my, what I believe in' (interview 1). And at this point in time, that party was UKIP, of which she also became a paid-up member offline. It was around this time that she also began to disengage from television news due to what she perceived as a blatant anti-Brexit bias. However, when I asked what had sparked her interest in UKIP she told me it was likely Nigel Farage's television interviews and his stance on 'immigration, and getting the country back' (interview 1) that had appealed to her – an important reminder of social media's place as just one element of a mutually constitutive media ecology (Postill, 2018).

There had been no particular ‘Eureka moment’, she said, but rather a gradual build-up. However, her interest in the issue of immigration stemmed from her concern about the changing demography of her local community, and her interactions with students and parents at the school where she taught. For Beatrice, it was the perceived increasing unwillingness of Muslims to integrate since 9/11 that bothered her. This was compounded by the scandal around the ‘grooming gangs’⁷, cases of which were uncovered near her local area. This led Beatrice to describe feeling that ‘they are the only people who have come over to our country and want to dominate, (...) they just want to install their way of life’ (interview 1). In this sense, the content Beatrice encountered on social media served not to provide new ideas, but rather to confirm her existing sentiments and concerns, which stemmed from her offline experiences. Beatrice told me that she felt it was her duty to share information on Facebook in order to educate young people in particular, who were being ‘fed mainstream media bias’ and ‘left-wing, anti-democratic stuff all the time’ (interview 1) and being ‘indoctrinated rather than educated’ at school (interview 2). Despite spending so much of her free time engaging with content around Brexit and Islam on Facebook, she downplayed her knowledge about relevant politicians, and reiterated to me in her follow-up interview, ‘I really wasn’t that interested in politics until this issue of Brexit came about, and it’s only because of that that (...) I’ve started on this mission [laughs]’.

Similarly conscious of her own political transformation around the issue of Brexit on Facebook was Eileen. A 61-year-old property entrepreneur who spent most of her time at her home in rural Northwest England, she told me how she had once looked down on those who used Facebook; even after her stepdaughter created an account for her, she only used it to connect with friends and colleagues she knew in real life. ‘I completely misunderstood what Facebook was about, (...) up until probably prior to [the 2016 referendum on] Brexit, I just used it like anybody else’.

This comment reveals much about what Eileen now saw Facebook to be ‘about’: finding and Sharing political information, a perspective shared by many of the

⁷ A term used to refer to organised child sexual exploitation, and in this milieu usually specifically to cases perpetrated by ‘Pakistani Muslims’. Prior to the fieldwork for this study, an independent inquiry by Alexis Jay found a large number of cases of such organised exploitation had occurred in the town of Rotherham, and that in this town the majority of perpetrators had been of Pakistani heritage (Jay, 2014). Convictions of Pakistani men for similar offences were subsequently made in a number of other British towns (Dearden, 2019). The issue was one of the most popular right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist causes in Britain at the time of the fieldwork.

participants and one which highlights a shift in uses of Facebook in wider society. As Kaspar and Müller-Jensen (2019, np) have noted, and as discussed in 2.3.3, ‘Facebook started as a platform intended for connecting people but it has developed into a rich information source’. According to the Pew Research Centre’s 2017 survey, around 55% of adults in Britain said they got their news from social media at least occasionally, and Facebook was by far the most popular platform for this (Pew Research Center, 2018). Facebook has become integral to not only distribution of and access to news, but also discussion of it within individuals’ networks, with a significant proportion of online news engagement occurring through incidental rather than deliberate exposure (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018; P. J. Boczkowski et al., 2018; Kümpel, 2019, pp. 165–167; Yamamoto & Morey, 2019). The fact that both news and entertainment coexist on Facebook adds to this potential for those who were not ‘political people’ to stumble across political news content (Anspach, 2017, p. 590). Furthermore, the increasingly personalised nature of social media content and the personal endorsement that is embedded in the architecture of social media and attached to each piece of content as it is displayed to users (in the form of who has Shared, Liked or Commented on the content) can add to its perceived credibility (Anspach, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2017, p. 3035).

Eileen told me that during this pre-Brexit era, she was oblivious to issues like the ‘migrant crisis’: ‘my husband said I lived in cloud cuckoo land, and I didn’t know anything about politics’. However, unlike Beatrice, Eileen recounted a specific life event that transformed her attitude towards politics and propelled her into full-time (self-described) ‘blogging’ on Facebook. She and her husband were driving back to the UK from their holiday home in Austria. When they reached the entrance to the Channel Tunnel in Calais, they witnessed ‘five or six migrants with, armed with iron bars and sticks, hanging off this truck’. Traffic was almost at a stand-still when,

this big African jumped off the back of this truck, (...) and he came up to the passenger door of the car (...) and he just said “hey, Blondie” [makes cutting noise and gestures at throat] (...) That was my epiphany, and I thought (...) why would you want to behead me?! (Eileen, interview 1)

Eileen described how she and her husband had been extremely shaken by this experience, the perceived safety and tranquillity of their holiday shattered. Following

this, she began to research the issue online. But it was a subsequent journey to Calais, when this previous trauma was revisited as they were confronted with burning tyres on the motorway in both directions, ‘riot police and hundreds of migrants’, that prompted Eileen to act. ‘I said “we can’t live like this! (...) We shouldn’t have this in our life. This is wrong”’ (interview 1). It was following this that she discovered conspiracy theories claiming that these conditions had been created deliberately by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, acting in line with ‘globalist’ visions and the ‘Kalergi Plan’ (see 2.3.2). Similar to Beatrice’s case, here ‘information’ discovered on social media provided an explanation for prior negative experiences and existing concerns.

As a truck driver’s daughter, Eileen told me that the issue of safety on the motorway was particularly personal to her. She began by setting up a Group to share ‘evidence’ she gathered from truckers, in response to what she felt was a lack of information provided, caused by a deliberate government cover-up. This was followed by deeper and deeper research, which led her to identify the European Union as a major source of enforced societal change in Britain and across the Western world. ‘So therefore I felt from my corner of the universe I had to do something. (...) The biggest thing I could do was explain what Brexit was really about, cos I didn't really know. I knew once I did the research’ (interview 1). As she Posted more and more information and analyses on Facebook in her own self-described ‘funny’ (humorous) style, Eileen began unwittingly to build up a following there. She now manages a Public interest Page with tens of thousands of followers, as well as Posting Publicly about Brexit on her own Page, a hobby which takes up about five hours each day. This highly active engagement made Eileen an outlier within the participant group, but the way she described her engagement is indicative of the satisfaction and empowerment that being able to take action and take the matter of knowledge into her own hands seemed to have given her.

Another participant who could pin-point the life-event that initiated her engagement with political information on Facebook was Jessica. Jessica was in her 40s when we met, and had previously run a successful business in the removals and haulage industry. She lived with her Nigerian-British partner and their adolescent daughter in London. Jessica told me she had not been political, having only voted once in her life, for the Liberal Democrats in 2010. Then an event⁸ turned her life upside down, leaving her lost

⁸ Jessica preferred the details of this event not to be recorded in the research.

and with little to do to fill her time. ‘I kind of escaped from my own reality of, you know, work and, life, and stuff, and you know, grieving for everything that I’d lost, to switching on the news’. Jessica used the term ‘awake’ to describe this turn towards political engagement: ‘it means (...) tuned in to what’s going on, rather than just living in [your] own personal bubble of family and work life and stuff’ (interview 1). This was in 2016, and one of the first things she began looking into was the issue of Brexit. After discovering claims about the effects of EU membership on Britain’s fishing and manufacturing industries, she then ‘stumbled across RT UK’ (interview 1), the British arm of Russia’s state backed news outlet formerly known as *Russia Today* (Hutchings, 2020), on television. Here she found discrepancies with news reported by British news outlets, leading her to question the narratives there and the interests behind them, and eventually to move from engaging with news on television to ‘literally put[ting] all my time’ into investigating politics online. Later in the year, the terrorist attack in Nice occurred, which left her ‘absolutely devastated’, particularly due to the fact that a truck, the symbol of the industry to which she had dedicated her life, had been used in the deadly assault. Whether or not she had already been engaging with anti-Islamic material is unclear, but the event helped to cultivate her suspicion around Islam and Muslims. ‘I even had Muslim friends and I was like “what on Earth is going on?” and they couldn’t really tell me, um, you know because they didn’t really want to tell’. Jessica continued her information-seeking, and by the time we met she had become particularly engaged with fears around ‘fractional reserve banking’ and an impending financial crisis, along with more radical claims about the Bilderberg Group⁹, the CIA, and the Kalergi Plan conspiracy that had been concerning Eileen.

Jessica’s sense of distrust in ‘mainstream media’ outlets was widespread across the participant group. For many this was a grievance that began long before their recent online political engagement, having developed over many years or even decades. This could be said to be reflective of the broader declining trust in and satisfaction with traditional news media sources and authoritative information institutions identified by Bennett and Pfetsch (2018, p. 245) which have been found to lead to preferences towards online news sources (Fletcher & Park, 2017). However, as is discussed in Chapter 5, participants’ negative perceptions of ‘mainstream media’ were

⁹ A group of North American and European elites who meet annually and whose secrecy makes them the object of a number of conspiracy theories (Sommerlad, 2018).

representative of a more radically anti-leftist worldview. The advent of the internet and social media has greatly facilitated the dissemination of such ideas and ideologies, allowing the groups who propagate these to capitalise, on an international scale, upon the kind of discontents that participants held. However, these discontents and their mediation are neither new nor confined to online communication platforms, as ‘social and mainstream media feed off one another in recursive loops of “viral reality”’ (Postill, 2018, p. 756). That is, while traditional media outlets (particularly, but not limited to tabloid newspapers) have laid considerable groundwork for anti-multiculturalist, anti-left-wing and anti-establishment sentiments (e.g. Kundnani, 2000), unverified information and inflammatory narratives circulated online ‘often feed back into the legacy press’ (W. L. Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p. 244) constituting a cycle of ‘disinformation-amplification-reverberation’ (W. L. Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 126) and contributing to the ‘mainstreaming’ of right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist ideology (Mondon & Winter, 2020).

For participants, Facebook served as an alternative source of information to what was perceived as a biased and limited ‘mainstream media’. For instance, Beatrice told me she had stopped watching television news because their ‘lies’ and ‘bias’ were too frustrating: ‘that is why really I now use social media to um, to keep up to date basically, (...) you can make your own mind up (...) instead of being fed (...) what the mainstream media want you to know’ (interview 1). Gerbaudo (2018, p. 745) has noted the ‘rebellious narrative that has come to be associated with social media’ and the way in which they are seen as a ‘voice for the underdog and unrepresented in opposition to mainstream news media’ (ibid, p. 748). These aspects have arguably made social media platforms like Facebook a useful dissemination tool for a burgeoning industry of alternative news sites and blogs, particularly on the right (Holt, 2019; Holt et al., 2019), and contributed to participants’ trajectories towards alternative information-seeking there.

While it was true that many participants had experienced an intense process of becoming politically engaged through and around their activities on Facebook, this did not necessarily mean that their political views or stances had undergone radical change. For instance, although Kirk, a 67-year-old Londoner who managed his own flooring business, described how he and those around him had recently ‘become political’, he

was clear that ‘I always was gunna vote out if they voted like ten years ago. If they had a referendum I’d have voted out’ (interview 1). For Fred, a retired administrative worker in his 60s in the Northeast of England, although his frustration with mainstream media bias had arisen around ‘Brexit in particular’ (interview 1), he told me he had developed his Euroscepticism over many years, as he watched various regulations introduced and manufacturing moved overseas.

In Helen’s case, she first opened her Facebook account in order to keep an eye on her children on social media, given growing public concern over online safety. A 57-year-old full-time carer for a relative, and mother of two young adults in the Midlands, she mostly spent her time on the platform ‘looking at cat pictures and playing Scrabble’ (interview 1), until she started to find information about politics and Brexit in particular. When I spoke to her, her activity on the platform centred heavily around political Posts. Though she told me, ‘I never thought I’d ever get into anything like that online’ (interview 1), the kinds of issues she was engaging with were not new concerns to her. ‘I think before (...) the word “Brexit” [came about] (...), I was never comfortable with being in the EU’, she told me, ‘because I felt, I’ve always felt our politicians have hidden behind the fact that “oh we can’t do this, we can’t do that” because of the EU’ (interview 1). She said, ‘I’ve learned so much over the last five or six years, but I was pretty much of this mind-set anyway with the limited knowledge I’ve got, cos it was a *feeling* inside me’ (interview 2, Helen’s emphasis).

Over the course of our two interviews, Helen described an array of different experiences she had had over her lifetime which contributed to her sense of unease about immigration and what she called ‘identity politics’ (interview 1). These included occasions on which her daughter had experienced harassment in a ‘Muslim-heavy area’ and bullying from left-wing ‘Corbynistas’ (interview 2) at school; the romantic involvement of her niece with a Muslim boy; her son’s difficulty finding work as a ‘white, heterosexual male’ (interview 1); and her own encounter with a ‘Pakistani taxi driver’ almost 40 years ago, who ‘tried to get in the back of the taxi with [her] because (...) he wasn’t particularly bothered about being paid in money’ (interview 1). For Helen these culminated in a strong sense of white victimhood, a concern that ‘anything to do with the white population doesn’t matter’ (interview 1) in the political and media agenda and that ‘whites’ were constantly being told they were ‘bad’ (interview 1). This

feeling was compounded by the visible white poverty she regularly encountered on the streets of her hometown alongside what she perceived to be the increasingly confident presence of Asian and Muslim cultures. As a carer and having come from a relatively working-class background, Helen was an opponent of economic austerity and had previously been a Labour voter. However, in recent years she ‘had a 360-degree about-face’ (interview 1) on the grounds of her disgust at the social positions of the left and her experience on ‘left-wing’ Facebook Groups and Pages which she perceived as ‘information-light’ and based on ‘name-calling’, ‘feelings and hysteria’ (interview 1). Her primary concerns at the time of our interviews were motherhood, ‘grooming gangs’, and gender politics. Helen’s route towards engagement with pro-Leave and right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics echoed that of Beatrice and Eileen in terms of the pre-existence of certain grievances, sentiments and experiences. Her specific concern with the politics of minority recognition and gender also alluded to the alternative form of knowledge and politics that social media had offered her – one in which her conservative attitudes towards family, gender and national belonging were understood as common sense, rather than ignored or ridiculed, and which addressed her pre-existing unease, the ‘feeling’ inside her.

As demonstrated by the above portraits, while Brexit was a central issue for many participants, they also engaged in a range of issues around, and outside of, Brexit – migration and gender in particular. In fact, for a small number within the participant group, Brexit, while a cause they supported, was secondary to their primary issue of concern. Neil was a 69-year-old South Wales resident who had become involved in information-seeking on social media around health and wellbeing following his retirement from his role as a head teacher. Curiosity had led him to investigate holistic remedies, before the algorithmically-driven ‘Recommended for you’ function on YouTube had suggested he watch anti-vaccine videos. What he described as a ‘rabbit hole’ eventually guided him towards the Q-anon and Deep State conspiracy theories¹⁰ and support for US President Donald Trump, around two years prior to our initial interview (around 2017). To Neil, Britain’s membership in the EU was just one part of a complex global system of covert manipulation: ‘you suddenly realize that you can’t

¹⁰ This brand of conspiracy theory claims that a far-reaching and evil ‘cabal’ or ‘Deep State’ is controlling US (and world) politics, and that Donald Trump’s secret mission during his presidency was to combat this, effectively elevating him to the level of messiah (Argentino, 2020; LaFrance, 2020).

look at issues like Brexit in isolation. All of these things are now interrelated on a global basis' (interview 1). Although Neil had 'always been interested in politics' (interview 1), unlike Helen or Fred he had not had concerns about the EU prior to beginning intense social media use, 'because like most people I was ignorant about it. We only knew what we were told in the press' (interview 1).

Neil's 'rabbit hole' case exemplifies the importance of algorithmically-determined content to participants' trajectories. As discussed in 2.2.2, the personalised content provided by social media is an important aspect of the logic of these platforms. While participants' accounts offer no conclusive evidence of the existence of 'echo chamber' or 'filter bubble' effects said to 'radicalise' individuals' political views and shield them from alternative arguments (e.g. Flaxman et al., 2016; Polonski, 2016), the importance of the logic of automation to participants' information consumption was certainly evident, and is discussed in more detail in section 4.3.1.

Also important to highlight in Neil's case is the central role played by content related to the US and President Donald Trump, strong support for whom was common among participants. Although the links between national and international issues within participants' narratives are elucidated in Chapter 5, it is worth noting the role that international issues played in participants' trajectories of politicisation on Facebook. The linking of national with international concerns was common in participants' Facebook Walls and Newsfeed, and appeared to have played a part in accelerating the engagement trajectories of some. Olivia, for instance, had developed her strong concerns about Islam and 'the Islamic takeover' (interview 1) from being a young girl growing up in a multicultural community in Southeast England. She had been involved in writing letters of complaint to the BBC and to her MP for many years, and despite her love of travel had 'boycotted' 'Islamic countries' (interview 1). However, it was not until she witnessed a protest against the visit of US President Donald Trump in London in 2018 that she 'really started using' Facebook and other social media. Disgusted at the 'terribly rude' behaviour of the 'left-wing' protesters, and irritated by what she felt was dishonest coverage by the mainstream media regarding the size and nature of the protest, Olivia 'did a tremendous amount of research on Donald Trump' online before setting about teaching herself how to use Facebook 'for the purpose of trying to educate other people' (interview 1). There she joined 'left-wing' Groups to

Post links to news articles she deemed factual, and by the time we met she was Posting several dozen items of content per day on her Wall, primarily about Islam, which she repeatedly referred to as her ‘topic’. Like Neil but unlike many of the other participants, Olivia’s interest in and support of Brexit was secondary to her involvement in other issues. However, like most participants she viewed Brexit as part of a wider global problem. Interestingly, in Olivia’s case it was when the contention around Trump became an issue of national importance in Britain, and when she was confronted with the scale of the local ‘left-wing’ enemy first-hand, that she was prompted to utilise the reach of social media to spread the word about her concerns.

Olivia and Neil’s cases demonstrate how the call to political engagement can be amplified by high-profile international issues. The importance of these international discourses of white victimhood to participants’ feelings of community and validation are expounded in 4.4, but these examples highlight the role that such discourses also played in participants’ trajectories towards engagement. The global connectivity afforded by social media clearly facilitated this. Participants described how friends in places like the US, Australia and South Africa would Post content about issues around immigration, crime or identity politics which resonated with their perceptions of the situation at home. Furthermore, many of the right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist personalities whose content was popular among participants (including Alex Jones, Ezra Levant and Avi Yemini) were based overseas and commented on issues there.

However, while participants’ concerns were often to some degree global, the above profiles also highlight how local and highly personal experiences played an important role in many of their trajectories. This included increasingly visible diversity in their local area (e.g. Beatrice, Deborah, Helen, Lawrence, Olivia), as well as negative encounters they or their children had experienced (e.g. Helen, Olivia). In Carl’s case, it was the widely-publicised murder of humanitarian volunteer Alan Henning by ISIL in Syria in 2013 that acted as the catalyst for his research into Islam and subsequent engagement with anti-Islam and pro-Leave material on Facebook and Twitter. A 53-year-old self-employed van driver in Northwest England, Carl told me in our initial interview that the incident had particularly affected him because he had personally known Henning. ‘So that’s why I got into, basically, I (...) read the Qur’an and the Nahidis and (...) I started getting into politics a bit cos I was getting a bit twisted about

the way they murdered him like that' (interview 1). By the time we met, Carl's research had driven him not only to become a frequent Public Poster of material on Facebook and occasional conspiracy theorist, but also a highly active member of UKIP in his local area.

While for many of the participants accidental or incidental encounters with alternative narratives and information acted as catalysts for their politicisation on social media, the importance of lived experiences highlighted by Carl's and other cases indicates that these online encounters are not necessarily sufficient to transform individuals into such highly active seekers and sharers of alternative political information online. Participants' experiences online should be understood as forming just one aspect of what Pilkington (2016, p. 74) has described as 'a complex web of local environment and personal psychodynamics and family dynamics' that form the context surrounding such trajectories.

Furthermore, in many of these cases it is not possible to ascertain whether participants found such alternative narratives appealing precisely because of their existing and/or growing concerns, or whether they had to some extent reinterpreted their past ('offline') experiences in light of the alternative information they had encountered. That is, 'a particular experience may provide a tool for narration of their path into activism but does not mean that it motivated it' (Pilkington, 2016, p. 75) and such narratives should not necessarily be taken at face value (K. Blee, 2002, p. 33). In his theoretical exploration of the way online platforms can be effectively used for self-socialisation into 'a right-wing populist worldview', Krämer (2017, p. 1302, see 2.3.1) describes how '[u]sers find concepts and interpretations of social phenomena that lead to a crystallization of previously latent, less specific, and clear-cut attitudes and grievances'. He draws on Kemmers and colleagues' (2015) analysis of the development of anti-establishment attitudes and their conceptualisation of this as a 'career' in which a social or personal crisis in an individual's life precedes the encountering of information that 'problematizes the current political conditions', prompting an 'awakening' as they 'explore and validate this critical attitude (...) and, finally, consolidate the new worldview, reinterpreting previous experiences in its light and drawing practical consequences' (Krämer, 2017, p. 1302). Jessica, whose views and interests were among the more radical of the participant group, represents the closest to this 'deviant career'

trajectory. However, few other participants described experiencing a crisis prior to their engagement.

However, regardless of the degree of their latent discontents, what was clear was that participants' engagement with alternative information on social media had transformed their political lives, and participants were clearly aware of this. As Kirk told me in our initial interview,

Social media probably changed my son's views as well as mine, you know? If you was on the fence, I think social media may give you that shove over the fence, (...) if you was thinking it ain't that bad in the EU and then you watch some of the stuff on social media and you think 'bloody hell, I didn't know it was that bad'. (...) that gives you the impetus to, you know, push on and get out of it... (Kirk, interview 1)

It is also clear that these trajectories towards online political engagement both reflected *and* fuelled the growing intensity of participants' discontent with a variety of issues around ethnic, cultural, religious, sexual and gender diversity and accompanying social change. Thus, these trajectories must be interpreted not only in terms of participants' individual experiences and the content available in the media sphere, but also within their broader contemporary socio-political context. Doing so reveals the way in which Brexit, much like 'new racism' (Gilroy, 1987; Barker, 1981) acts as a vehicle for mobilising a diverse array of discontents around race, nation, immigration, belonging, entitlement and sovereignty. However, while culture and cultural difference has been used by 'new racism' as a more legitimate register for speaking about (that is, a proxy for) race, Euroscepticism has arguably provided a yet more legitimate discourse with which to both explain and respond to these long-held discontents (explored in Chapter 5) without the need to refer explicitly to race or ethnicity. This has made Brexit a particularly powerful mechanism for crystallising them.

4.3 Engaging with political content: Participants' practices on Facebook

Although participants tended to prefer to discuss their political views over their social media use and did not always have a clear awareness of the ways in which they used

Facebook, interviews coupled with observations of what participants Posted on their Walls painted a broad picture of some of the features of their practices on the platform. Despite the only behavioural criteria when identifying potential participants being that they had Publicly Shared at least one piece of pro-Leave content in the past month, the majority of participants were extremely active users¹¹. Almost all participants told me that they used Facebook on a daily basis, for several hours each day, some acknowledging that they were perhaps ‘a bit addicted to it’ (Audrey, interview 1). For most, this usage was interspersed throughout the day, in between work and other activities. For example Fred said, ‘I’ve got it on my phone so I might just click onto it every so often (...) I don’t sit down for a certain length of time (...) It’s just as and when I’ve got a few minutes’. While many other participants also almost solely used their mobile phones to access Facebook, this did vary; those participants who spent most of their days at home, like Helen, Deborah and Beatrice, found the larger screen of a tablet or desktop much more user-friendly.

While some participants did describe engaging in more social practices on Facebook, like Posting pictures of their children, Sharing jokes, or taking part in discussion on sport, the primary activities most participants said they engaged in on Facebook at the time of the interviews were finding and Sharing political information and content. Politics was so central to Northwest-based retiree Deborah’s Facebook use that when after discussing politics at length I suggested we bring our conversation back to talk about social media she retorted, ‘Yes but it *is* important, (...) you’re asking me why I’m on Facebook and these are the very *reasons* I’m on Facebook’ (interview 1, Deborah’s emphasis).

The following sub-sections demonstrate the ways in which the logic of the Facebook platform shaped participants’ political engagement practices there. While discussion is separated into processes of encountering and publishing (‘Sharing’) content, the two were invariably interlinked; not only were both related to participants’ interests and political passions, but most content was encountered elsewhere before it was Shared. Moreover, data about what participants Shared undoubtedly fed back to algorithms determining which content Facebook presented to them.

¹¹ Of course, this is likely not unrelated to participants’ propensity to respond to the recruitment invitation.

4.3.1 Encountering content on Facebook

Participants' descriptions of the ways in which they encountered content revealed a high level of passivity, pointing to the central role of algorithmically-determined content in their information-seeking. In studies of Facebook use, 'passive' use generally refers to content viewing rather than active communication behaviours (e.g. Verduyn et al., 2015). However, the passivity I specifically refer to in relation to participants' practices is a content-finds-you approach to content viewing, in which algorithmically-derived Newsfeed and Notification content and Page, Group or Friend recommendations are the dominant driver of the content with which a user engages, rather than actively using search functions or visiting Pages or Groups in which they have a particular interest.

Participants told me they primarily used their Newsfeed or Notifications to find content, and many described a practice of 'scrolling' through Facebook, or encountering content that 'comes up' (Beatrice, interview 2). Although participants Shared content from a variety of sources, both within and outside the Facebook platform, they rarely visited external sites directly; rather they were directed there from their Newsfeed. This was the same case with Groups: while most were members of Groups based on their interests and a handful were active in these, many participants only engaged with Group content when it appeared on their Newsfeed or in their Notifications. For some this passive approach was a matter of time - as Mark, a single father and teacher based in Yorkshire, said, 'I ain't got the time in the day' (interview 1). Participants seemed to feel Facebook kept them busy enough already, unsurprising given the limitless nature of the Newsfeed portal, which is constantly updated in reverse chronological order. This experience of social media as a continuous – and endless – flow produces ambivalence, unsettledness and fatigue, accompanying a sense that important happenings could be taking place that warrant one's immediate attention (Lupinacci, 2020, pp. 5, 8).

For the same reasons of time constraints and ambivalence, some participants also admitted to not always reading the content of online news, alternative news and other blog sites before Sharing them on Facebook. However, this is not to say that participants did not critically engage with information and attempt to verify things or research them further at times. Such critical research and checking information was in fact very important to participants' understanding of their engagement, as is addressed in Chapter

6. In particular, participants described a practice of ‘Googling’ things that they were interested in when they wanted to learn more or to find corroborating sources, but these investigations were usually prompted by content they had encountered on the Facebook platform.

Exceptions, however, were Olivia and Jessica, both of whom said there were sites they visited directly to find information, and were subscribers to particular YouTube channels. In their follow-up interviews, Jessica showed me the notifications she received via email when her subscribed YouTube channels had uploaded new content, and Olivia named some of the YouTubers and alternative news sites that she engaged with regularly. Eileen was also an exception; as a self-described ‘blogger’, her use of Facebook was far less passive than many other participants. In fact, she said she rarely checked her Newsfeed: ‘I never get a chance to go on it cos I’m either writing something, Sharing something, checking something, um, or talking to somebody or, answering messages’. She told me that around ‘35 percent’ of the content she Posted was ‘as a direct result of a source’. Some of this was content sent to her by followers, a result of her relatively high profile within the pro-Leave Facebook milieu. However, she also spoke of a civil servant who regularly provided her with leads or confirmed or dismissed information she found elsewhere.

Many participants told me they did not have favourite Pages or external websites, and generally the source of the information was less important than the content and the fact that it ‘was there’. For example when I asked Kirk about a particular online personality he had Shared content from, he replied, ‘Yeah, I’ll Share anything (...) I like her, (...) I would follow her, (...) I wouldn’t sign up to anything but if she’s on there, I wanna know what she’s saying’. Most participants told me they would not directly visit external websites, even those whose content I observed them Sharing on Facebook (including mainstream news outlet websites, alternative news sites or blogs), and their relative lack of interest in external sites illustrates the importance of the Facebook platform as a centralised portal for information-seeking. The content produced by these websites was unlikely to have reached participants without Facebook’s mediation.

As for other social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram or Gab, very few participants were active on these. While for some this was because there was something about Facebook in particular that they preferred (e.g. Jessica described Twitter as ‘like

tweeting into thin air' (interview 1) compared with a sense of community she enjoyed on Facebook), for most this was because it was the platform they had been introduced to first. Either the prospect of having to learn how to use a new platform held little appeal, or they felt Facebook kept them busy enough already and they did not want things to 'get out of hand' (Deborah, interview 1). Particularly given participants' focus on their Newsfeed content and the effectively endless nature of this feed as one carries on scrolling through, it is not difficult to imagine this feeling of having more than enough to keep oneself occupied. Carl was one exception to this, as he used both Twitter and Facebook, but his method of encountering content still demonstrated a high level of passivity as he told me he did not differentiate between the two platforms; he engaged with the content as it appeared in the Notifications on his mobile phone, regardless of the platform.

Olivia was the only participant who had diversified into multiple other platforms; perhaps because she had been using Facebook for the shortest period of time, she appeared to have no institutionalised loyalty to it. In fact, her use of multiple platforms, such as Gab, MeWe and Wake Up UK, was entirely instrumental. Having already incurred multiple temporary bans, Olivia was future-proofing her online activity, but she was also deliberately broadening the reach of her messaging for what she saw as a fickle and simple-minded audience. She told me that she herself did not have a favourite platform,

but certain people will, cos people are habitual like that (...) They're not prepared to take the time to learn how each and every one of these things work. I am. You know, so therefore I have to cover all elements of people, all elements of their brain capacity or lack of, and Post on all of these social sites. (Olivia, interview 2)

Such exceptions notwithstanding, it was clear that implicit in most participants' information-seeking practices was a passivity and a privileging of convenience – products of the logic of the Facebook platform itself. It is this logic that steers users towards passivity. This includes the fact that the home page of the Facebook website or app is one's Newsfeed, the practice of 'scrolling' so heavily built into the platform's interface, and the primacy of Notifications and Friend recommendations at the top of the home page.

This reliance on Newsfeed and Notification content makes the role of the algorithms pivotal, as these determine the content displayed in these. We have already seen the significance of this in participants' trajectories towards engagement (see Section 4.2). As discussed in 2.2.2, algorithms on Facebook use information on user preferences – predicted and categorised based on for example what types of content they (and their Friends) have Liked, Followed or interacted with – to rank content and determine whether and in which order it is displayed in that individual's Newsfeed. This means algorithms have 'consequences for who is exposed to news and politics on Facebook' (Thorson et al., 2019, pp. 1–2). Furthermore, algorithms are not value-neutral (Thorson et al., 2019, p. 3), and in Facebook's case, corporate focus on generating profit from the sale of micro-targeting data to advertisers necessitates frequent input from users, meaning that we can assume a bias in these algorithms towards privileging content more likely to engender recordable actions or interactions (Bucher, 2017; DeVito, 2017, p. 756; Thorson et al., 2019).

However, as noted in 2.2.2, these algorithms are popularly imagined as unbiased (DeVito, 2017; Duguay, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). Research on awareness of algorithms and their biases has delivered mixed results. A study by Eslami et al. (2015, p. 153) found that 'more than half of the participants (62.5%) were not aware of the News Feed curation', while another, by Rader and Gray (2015, p. 179), identified that the vast majority of participants were aware that they were not being shown everything and demonstrated 'a fairly sophisticated understanding of the system'. Most recently, Gran et al. (2020) found stark demographic (e.g. age, gender, education level, and location) differences in levels of awareness of algorithms in Norway, potentially constituting a new form of 'digital divide'. Importantly, as Bucher (2017) has noted, differing levels of awareness of the existence and power of algorithms raise questions about how such awareness may be affecting the way in which social media platforms are used. In other words, not only the content of the algorithms themselves, but also participants' interactions with, and culturally embedded understanding of, those algorithms, would have shaped their information-seeking practices.

In the current study, participants' degree of awareness of these algorithms and their influence varied. For instance, in his initial interview Fred interpreted the increased amount of political content shown to him on Facebook as there being 'so much (...)

going on on Facebook’ in recent years, rather than considering the effects of behavioural traces and algorithmic targeting on this. Similarly, when I raised the subject of algorithmic filtering on Facebook, Deborah reflected on her assumptions, saying that until that moment, ‘it never occurred to me how it, the system actually worked (...) I just was under the naïve assumption that everything that came in worked its way through my Facebook [Newsfeed] at some stage’ (interview 1). Lawrence also attributed the limited reactions to his Posts outside of ‘the same few’ to the majority of his Friends not being ‘interested’ in engaging with his content, and did not seem to consider that they may simply not have seen it due to Newsfeed-filtering algorithms.

In contrast, Isaac was aware that viewing certain content on the platform meant that he would be targeted by online advertisers with particular products, but he saw this cynically, remarking that ‘I think that’s just the progression of technology or AI (...) they’ll be pre-empting our thoughts’. Similarly, Mark said that ‘if I happen across things it usually means that (...) you’re more likely to happen across other things’, and Eileen was aware that ‘if you don’t interact’ with someone, you are likely to be shown less of their Posts. However, participants did not problematise this in terms of the inherent political bias in the content they viewed and the routes they were prompted along in their information-seeking online. This was surprising given their extremely critical stance towards mainstream media, as well as their criticisms of Facebook as a biased platform. This inconsistency seemed to be due to their assumption that the bias inherent in these media was invariably ‘left-wing’, and their construction of these media as in opposition to themselves and the views they held. In fact, they viewed their information discovery as *despite* control over information dissemination, rather than because of it.

4.3.2 Sharing content on Facebook

In addition to encountering, or being engaged *by* content, participants also engaged *in* (see Chapter 1) the practice of publishing content to their own Wall, a practice known as ‘Sharing’. Sharing includes the use of the Share button to recirculate existing content (which may have been produced and published by a Group, Page, or another individual user) as well as creating Posts of one’s own to Share with others. As is the case for the display of one’s Profile (see 3.3.1), a user has the option of Sharing either Publicly or Privately.

While insights into the sorts of content encountered on Facebook relied on participants' own descriptions of their social media use, the results of Sharing practices were able to be directly observed in the study (see 3.4.2), and these observations were used to complement the meaning ascribed by participants in interviews. This approach was useful because there was always the potential for participants' narratives about their practices to be affected by potentially low degrees of awareness of their own practices, or by their mindfulness of social desirability, which is particularly relevant here given recent public discourse around fake news and disinformation (see 2.3.3). However, the purpose of this approach was not to verify claims made by participants about their behaviour, but rather to add context to the meaning-making of participants (see 3.5).

Figure 2 illustrates the varied types of content that participants were observed Sharing on their Facebook Walls, particularly the prominence of visual content. Figure 3 illustrates the sources from which they Shared Posts¹². The majority of Posts were Shared directly from a Page, Group or user on the Facebook platform, and the smallest proportion was content created by participants themselves. Eileen was an exception as her 'blogging' activity had a heavy focus on generating her own content. This trend was a reflection of the relatively passive ways in which participants encountered content through Facebook as a centralised portal (as discussed above). It also highlights the importance of a practice of 'passing on' discovered information, which is explored below.

For many participants, Sharing was 'the point' of Facebook, and some Shared dozens of items of content each day. Although Sharing is just one way in which users can 'interact' with existing content (alongside Commenting on or Liking content, for example), it is a central feature of Facebook, and could be described as the basic premise of the platform. As noted in 2.2.2, Facebook 'direct(s) users to share information with other users through purposefully designed interfaces', and this 'ideology of sharing pretty much set the standard for other platforms' (van Dijck, 2013, pp. 46–47).

¹² Olivia's observed content was excluded from these, as this was mainly observed on a site with different functionality – see 3.4.2.

Figure 2: Shared Posts by content type¹³

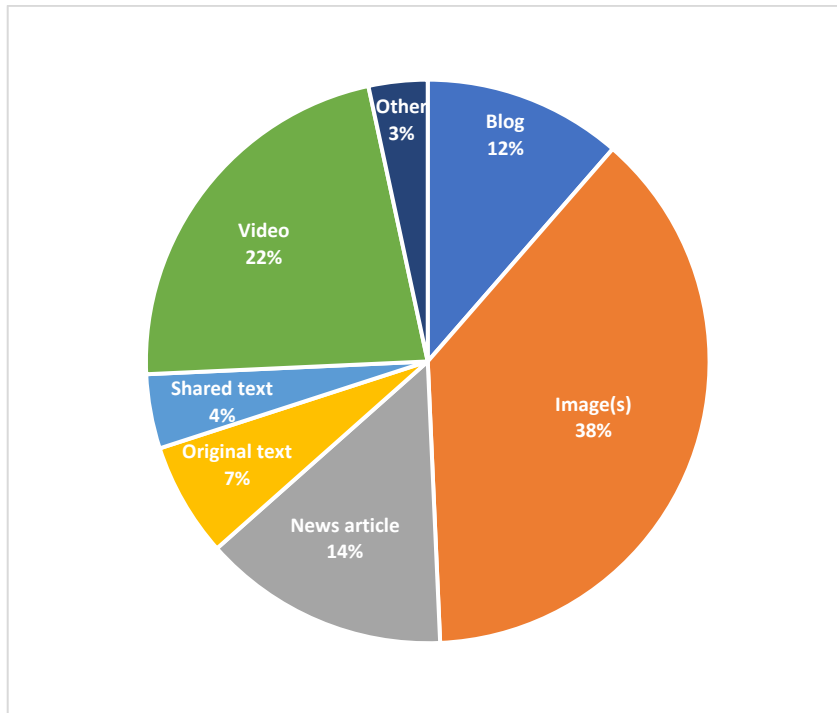
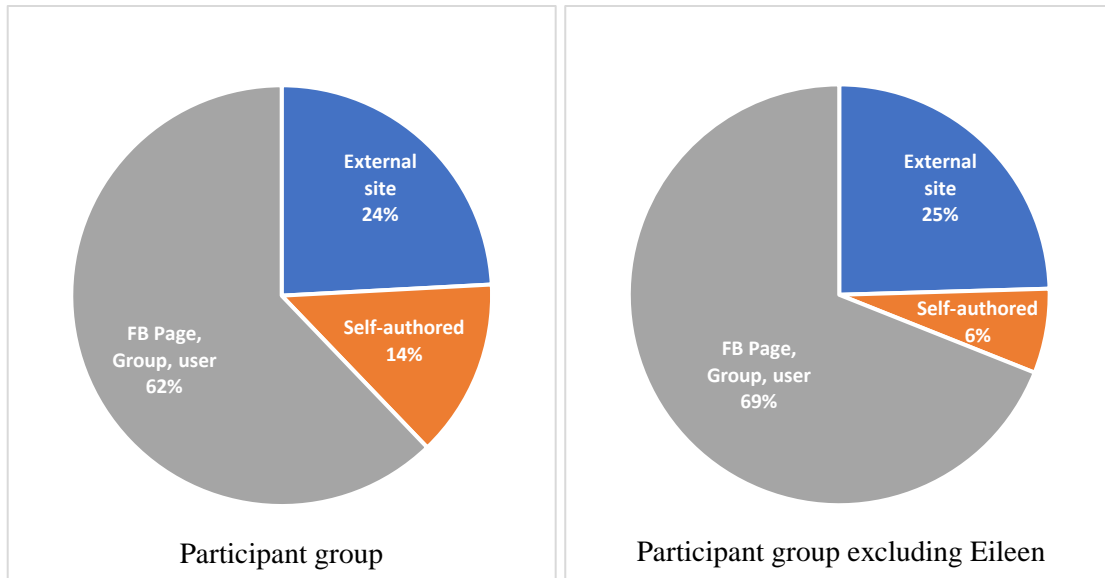


Figure 3: Shared Posts by content source



However, what participants Shared still only constituted a portion of the content they encountered or even that appealed to them, prompting the question: what made some content more Shareable than others? Participants often struggled to reflect coherently

¹³ ‘Original text’ refers to a text-based Post not Shared from another source (self-authored). Only conventional news websites were included in ‘News article’; alternative news sites were classified as ‘Blogs’. ‘Other’ includes Facebook Memories, links to Facebook Events, Groups or Pages, tweets and links to external websites that were not news or blog content.

on their motivations for Sharing particular content. Sometimes this seemed attributable to a lack of conscious awareness around their own behaviours (Lawrence described ‘hitting the Share button’ as having ‘almost become a natural thing about living’ (interview 2)), but at other times it was simply that participants did not see any complexity in this practice – if they ‘felt strongly’ about content or felt it ‘need[ed] to be said’ (Kirk, interview 2), they would Share it. As Mark told me, ‘if I like it, I’ll Share it. If I like it a lot, I’ll make a Comment about it. If I just like it, (...) I might just Like it’ (interview 2). Jessica even told me ‘I Share from instinct’ (interview 1). When asked, participants played down the significance of choosing to Share, at times describing having Shared things just because they found them humorous (Isaac, Jessica), thought they might be uplifting to others (Audrey, Deborah), or simply to support a friend or family member (Audrey, Mark).

Much of the content participants Shared was emotionally provocative, and as alluded to above, ‘feeling’ was frequently described as a factor in the decision to Share or to Comment. For instance, Kirk told me that of all the content he saw, ‘I don’t, you know, Comment on a lot unless it really sort of gets in me throat’ (interview 1). As Deborah put it in her initial interview, ‘it depends how I feel about the subject. Sometimes I’ll just put a Like or a “not like” or an “angry,” or if I feel a little bit more involved I’ll make a Comment, if I feel more involved I will Share it with my Facebook Friends, and if I feel especially involved I will make a Comment of my own [when Sharing]’. The importance of emotions and affect to participants’ social media use is discussed in Chapter 6. However, it is important to note that despite ambivalent narratives around when to choose to Share content, participants were generally very passionate about the content they were Sharing.

It was clear from the way in which participants described their Facebook use that Sharing represented a way to spread the word or to educate others, which they considered crucial to regaining control over the current predicament (this predicament is elucidated in Chapter 5). Alongside discovering ‘truths’, the ability to spread information was seen as one of the main appeals of Facebook use, and this was primarily done through Sharing content to one’s own Wall. This was also the reason participants gave for Sharing their Posts Publicly. Many participants felt it imperative to make others aware of what was going on, ‘to inform each other’ (Eileen, interview

2) or to ‘warn everyone’ (Olivia, interview 1). Thus, participants accounted for decisions about Sharing based on this being information ‘that people need to know’ (Jessica, interview 1). Lawrence summarised the sentiments of many of the participants when he said, ‘you just wanna help educate people and open people’s eyes to what’s going on’ (interview 1). Beatrice in particular took this on as her ‘mission’, saying she felt that ‘having been [working] in education, it is one of my responsibilities to educate the young’ (interview 1). Sharing was part of satisfying her compulsion to ‘get the message out’, a desire which left her so frustrated she said, ‘sometimes I feel like stripping off naked and going standing in the street and [shouting] “Why are you being so stupid? Why don’t you listen to me!”’ (interview 2). For Neil his Sharing practice, which focused on conspiracy theories about the ‘Deep State’ and pharmaceutical companies (‘big pharma’), was ‘not necessarily to promote a particular message’ but to encourage people not to ‘close your eyes and just ignore the things’ (interview 2).

In doing this, Neil, like many participants, hoped he could ‘be part of a change’ (interview 2). Several participants also stressed that they were Sharing this information for the sake of their children, grandchildren or future generations in general. Some described their Sharing practice in altruistic terms, almost like volunteering. Eileen, who dedicated herself full-time to researching, summarising and Sharing information with her followers, told me, ‘I’m not interested in getting my way. I’m interested in other people making a choice from an informed platform’ (interview 2). The idea expressed by some was that the average person was extremely busy performing the duties of a ‘normal’ citizen (working, picking up their grandkids, etc.) and did not have the time or energy to engage with anything other than the inadequate ‘mainstream media’ news. Thus, participants felt it was their duty to provide these good citizens with information in a format they could understand (rendering these narratives simultaneously valorising and patronising of the unenlightened whom participants sought to serve). Similarly, Mark described what he saw as a fatigue on the issue of Brexit, saying he felt Remainers were ‘trying to wear people down’ and therefore ‘a lot of my motivation [to Share] is like “let’s keep going,” (...) cos these people’ll get their own way’ (interview 1).

Discussions in interviews also revealed instrumental and strategic practices, particularly in terms of attracting and maintaining audience attention. These practices

reflected the way in which the personalisation and curation functions of the Facebook platform afforded participants the opportunity to authenticate as well as take ownership of circulating content. One of these strategies included Sharing the same content multiple times (although not all participants who I raised this with had clear recollections of their motivations for doing this). Participants like Neil were aware that ‘when you go on [Facebook] there are so many Posts to look through (...) people may not have seen what I Posted’ (interview 2), and thus when they thought something was particularly important they were inclined to Share it again to ‘see whether Sharing it twice gets it out any further’ (Lawrence, interview 2). Other participants were more condescending in their motivations for repeat Sharing. For instance, Beatrice showed me a gallery where she regularly saved images on her tablet in order to re-Share them ‘because people forget (...) unless you keep feeding people (...) it’s like a special educational needs kid (...) two sentences and they’ve forgotten’ (interview 2).

Eileen was especially clear about wanting to maintain audience interest, and curated both her personal Page and her interest Page accordingly. Regarding the interest Page she ran, which had tens of thousands of followers, she said, ‘if I just stuck to Brexit, which is my passion, they’d get bored and they’d leave the Page, so I have to make it more general’. On the Wall of her personal Page she used humour to keep people interested, and on both Pages she described going to great lengths to present information in an accessible format. ‘People want to access information quickly (...) Facebook followers don’t want to read the Guardian, and they don’t want to read the Telegraph (...) So I’ll bullet point a few things and then I’ll do them on a Post and just quickly Share them’ (interview 2).

Despite mostly Sharing pre-existing content (as opposed to creating original content), many participants also regularly added their own Comment when they Shared, as a strategy for drawing audience attention and increasing the effectiveness of their information spreading activities (see Figure 4). Olivia told me she rarely wrote anything personal in this Comment, but rather tended to write ‘Share Share Share’ in order to ‘promote them to Share that video’ (interview 2). When I asked Lawrence about this behaviour in his follow-up interview he said,

If you just Share something and you’re not putting your own thoughts or your own feeling into it, people just look at what you’re Sharing and just

think ‘they’re off again’ (...) But I’d rather people know that I’m putting the effort in to have that tangent, and speak how I’m feeling. (Lawrence, interview 2)

Such practices once again illustrate the way in which participants’ political engagements on Facebook represented a means for exercising agency, by taking control of information dissemination and seeking to actively contribute to the knowledge of others.

Figure 4: Example of a Post Shared by Mark in which he added his own Comment



However, participants also described their motivations for Sharing in terms of self-expression or having a ‘voice’. Kirk told me it was about ‘my personal feelings. I wanna be able to say what I wanna say’ (interview 2) and Beatrice said one of the reasons she preferred social media to traditional media was because it gave her ‘a method of answering them back’ (interview 1). In this vein, some participants stressed to me that they were ‘not bothered’ (Isaac, interview 2) about reactions to or repercussions from their Posts; their objective was simply to put the information or their point of view ‘out there’ (Neil, interview 1).

Deborah was particularly explicit about the role that Facebook played in providing a voice. In her initial interview speaking about the imprisonment of ‘Tommy Robinson’ she said, ‘it fitted in with my general feeling that certain factions are just not listened

to, that we're virtually gagged'. Later, she told me that the issue of 'racism against white people' was 'not being acknowledged. And this is where Facebook comes in. (...) As a place where we can speak'. Regarding Brexit in particular, she remarked, 'we want our voice on Facebook for Brexit. Because, there again, we don't feel we've got much of a voice because we have been labelled in so many instances as ignorant, not really knowing what we're doing...' (interview 1).

Deborah was just one of many participants who was vocal in her interview about feeling like the 'mainstream media' were failing to represent her views (as a Leave supporter, a member of the (native) 'majority', or someone 'right-wing' or 'centrist'), or that those who voted Leave in the referendum were portrayed as not having known what they were doing or as 'racist'. Some participants said this made them feel silenced, and as Mark put it, 'the majority of the mainstream people, they don't speak their minds, right? Because they're worried about consequences and things like that' (interview 2). Feelings of being dismissed or ignored by media and political actors are in line with the studies of pro-Leave sentiment by Walkerdine (2020), McKenzie (2017a, 2017b) and Gilbert (2015) discussed in 2.4. While those studies focused on the working class, the current study demonstrates that such a sense of political marginalisation may not occur only along class lines, but also between stances (towards immigration, for example) deemed politically legitimate and illegitimate. In Pilkington's (2016) study about participation in the EDL, a group that shares some of the nativist and Islamophobic attitudes held by participants in the current study, this sense of political marginalisation and being denied a legitimate arena to air their views about Islam, immigration and nationalism among participants 'compound[ed] a wider disengagement from the political sphere' and 'scepticism about the functioning of contemporary formal democracy' (ibid, p. 203). Street activism afforded those participants a political voice outside of the 'politics of silencing' (ibid, p. 212). Clear parallels can be drawn with the sentiments and responses of participants in the current study. As Helen summarised regarding her use of Facebook, 'when you try and speak to a member of parliament about it and he closes the conversation down, you go elsewhere to look for your answers. So you get pushed towards social media, and try and speak to people that don't want to shut you down' (interview 1). In her follow-up interview she told me emphatically, 'We're sick of being told we're wrong. We're sick of being told we're stupid. We're sick of being told they know better than we do'.

There were also contexts in which some participants described practising caution in their Sharing behaviour. Participants were acutely aware of the potential for incurring a ban on the platform, often having learned from experience. This was one reason Olivia, Eileen and Beatrice gave for being selective about what they Shared. Beatrice told me she had become increasingly cautious because of the duty she felt she had to educate people: ‘if I get banned, who is left to put out that message?’ (interview 1).

However, not only fear of incurring a ban, but also fear of social judgement and participants’ own moral codes sometimes informed cautious Sharing behaviour. While some participants were keen to stress that they did not care what others thought of their views, Mark lamented that he was ‘too scared’ to Publicly Share anything in support of ‘Tommy Robinson’ because ‘I’d be fearful for people getting, you know, thinking I was a racist or whatever’ (interview 2). Eileen was careful about Sharing content from certain websites or Pages in particular because she felt some commentators tended to stretch the truth in order to appeal to Islamophobia, and despite her quite severe reservations about Islam, she did not want to encourage discussion on her Page to deteriorate into what she called ‘Muzzie bashing’ (interview 2). Deborah expressed similar reasons for her reticence to join the unmoderated social media platform Gab:

I do want to be careful. I don't want to be associated with extreme far-right. Not particularly because it bothers me what people say about me, but my views would not be listened to (...) I'd be dismissed automatically [if I was known to be active on that platform]. Almost like being a member of Ku-Klux-Klan. (Deborah, interview 2)

Participants also professed to exercise caution about Sharing what could be labelled ‘vigilante’ content, that is, Posts encouraging awareness about individual vandals, paedophiles or other criminals, often accompanied by photographs of the individual in question. Although such Posts were not uncommon in this milieu, when asked whether they would normally Share such content, many (though not all) said they would be cautious about this without verification that it was credible, because they did not believe this was the right thing to do. Although such narratives did not always reflect the practices observed, and participants’ moral narratives about themselves were not always consistent with the ideology revealed in other comments they made, these accounts reflected participants’ broader desire to understand their social media

practices in moralistic terms. Not only did participants not wish to jeopardise their ability to have a voice on Facebook, but they were careful not to compromise their positive moral identities as ‘truth tellers’. Their cautious behaviour (or narratives about this in interviews) again reflected their awareness of negative perceptions of Leave supporters, and their frustrations around these.

In summary, participants’ engagement with content on Facebook, in terms of both encountering and Sharing, were shaped by the logic of the platform: its algorithmic nature, its role as an alternative information source, its focus on Sharing and the functionalities it provided to make Sharing an active and personalised process. Importantly, these practices provided participants with a means to reclaim control over the information they consumed and disseminated, having felt that traditional media sources and formal political arenas limited the views they were exposed to, and/or dismissed their pro-Leave and anti-diversity perspectives as ignorant and invalid. Facebook provided participants with an unprecedented tool: ‘now we’ve got this wonderful opportunity to find out information and share it with massive numbers (...) you’ve got the facility, in your pocket, to find anything out, (...) send it to someone...’ (Eileen, interview 1). Furthermore, this tool was particularly important at this crucial moment in history. According to Lawrence,

A lot of people just wanna live their lives and say ‘whatever, whatever’, but, if you keep doing that then before you know it you’ll be dictated to by the EU and you won’t have a say in anything you wanna do. So I’m just trying to stand up for us at the minute. My voice is important while I still have it. (Lawrence, interview 2)

Sundar (2008) has argued that the ability to act as a source of information on social media provides individuals with a sense of agency and ‘perceived control over their information universe’ (in Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015, p. 242). Similarly, research on blogging has suggested that publishing information online can have an empowering effect (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). In the current study, when asked whether they thought these practices were having an effect, a number of participants referred to friends or family whose opinions on the EU and Brexit they had seen turn around thanks to Facebook. Some were adamant that support for Leave was even higher than at the time of the referendum, often basing this on what they had seen online, with Fred

remarking that this was ‘because a lot of people have realised (...) I mean if you look at all the Newsfeeds (...) it’s about an 80/20 split between Leave and Remain’ (interview 2).

Having already exhausted their democratic avenue via a referendum result they felt was being deliberately side-lined by those in power, participants’ practices on Facebook represented perhaps the only remaining means for taking action towards finally having their concerns addressed. ‘You know, we just, we want out. We want to be able to have our own sovereignty back, and Facebook gives us an outlet for that’ (Deborah, interview 1). Despite the passive and algorithmically-driven nature of participants’ content encountering behaviour, their descriptions of the way they used Facebook for encountering and Sharing political content reflected its empowering value to them in a context where they felt politically disempowered. As Eileen said of Facebook, ‘it’s powerful (...) for what I’m doing it’s been invaluable. Absolutely invaluable’ (interview 1). Whether or not participants perceived their online practices as having political efficacy, they represented a new means of empowerment, reflected in narratives about having a voice and educating others as well as themselves. However, this sense of empowerment was not only related to being able to find and Share information, but also to the ability to connect with likeminded individuals, and this is explored in the next section.

4.4 Validation and community through political engagement on Facebook

Krämer (2017) theorises the importance of group identification to socialisation into a ‘right-wing populist identity’ on social media, and this echoes other studies which find that isolated individuals can find a common identity through engagement with right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist content online that gives them a sense they are ‘not alone’ (e.g. Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Koster & Houtman, 2008). This section explores whether participants’ political engagements on Facebook provided them with a sense of value in the form of such feelings of community or solidarity online.

In follow-up interviews, participants were explicitly asked whether or not they felt like part of a community of like-minded individuals on Facebook. Their self-declared community consciousness varied. Many, including Beatrice, Olivia, Carl, George and

Isaac, were adamant that they were not seeking ‘any bonding with anyone’ on Facebook (Olivia, interview 2), and told me they felt they were just individuals who Liked or Shared things that they personally agreed with, but that did not have any bearing on their identity. Conversely, Fred, Neil, Deborah and Jessica responded in the affirmative, some eagerly. Other participants found the question more difficult to answer and could not give a definitive response.

Of course, the question of whether one felt a member of a ‘community’ prompts self-disclosure, and it is pertinent to bear in mind that participants’ ontological narratives in interviews may not necessarily have reflected their actual sentiments and interactions on Facebook. For instance, Carl responded to this question by saying he did not like ‘gang’ mentality, illustrating how for some the notion of belonging to a ‘group’ could carry socially undesirable connotations. The idea of feeling like a member of a community could also have been interpreted in different ways by different participants. For instance, both Lawrence and Mark implied that they found the question redundant – given the referendum result and the opinions expressed in their ‘offline’ milieus they were simply one of the ‘majority’. Furthermore, even some of those who were adamant that they did not feel part of a ‘community’ of Brexiteers on Facebook spoke in a collective ‘we’ when referring to their political sentiments and demands.

Nonetheless, some participants clearly benefited from a sense of affirmation or empowerment that resulted from their political engagements on Facebook. The discovery of an alternative discourse on Brexit and other socio-political issues, countering what they saw as an anti-Brexit or pro-‘left-wing’ discourse propagated by the media, sometimes provided a feeling of relief or validation. This affirmation was also gained from the visibility of others who shared similar views, whether through the discussion in the Comments on Posts, or simply as quantified in the number of Likes, Followers or Group members of Pages supporting Brexit. As Helen told me,

It was interesting to find out there were so many other people that thought the same. Because, from mainstream media you would think that everybody thinks the way they try and portray things. And I think the internet has brought people together and made us realise that more of us think the same than they try and make us believe (chuckles). (Helen, interview 1)

Mark described a similar sense of relief in discovering this discourse online: ‘it’s only this Brexit issue and everything, where people have actually had the balls to talk about immigration, because you can’t mention immigration without being called a fascist or a, or whatever by certain people’. Deborah was optimistic about the potential of pro-Leave Facebook users to bring about political change because, ‘people are (...) being supported and encouraged in their views where they may not find that support and encouragement anywhere else’ (interview 2).

The appeal of international issues within participants’ Facebook milieu may also be related to this sense of validation. As mentioned in 4.2, reference to and comparison with events and situations outside of Britain (particularly the celebrity of Donald Trump, but also issues around ‘white genocide’ in South Africa, ‘African gangs’ in Australia, and African and Muslim migrants in other European countries) featured frequently on participants’ Walls and in their interviews. Participants drew parallels between what was ‘happening’ in Australia with regards to immigration and the situation in the UK, and lamented the fact that there was no equivalent of Donald Trump in power at home. At the same time, they also Shared Posts about actions of Trump they supported which had no immediate bearing on British politics. Figures 5 and 6 give examples of Posts where these international issues featured.

Figure 5: Video Shared by Mark from the Facebook Page of the Daily Express newspaper

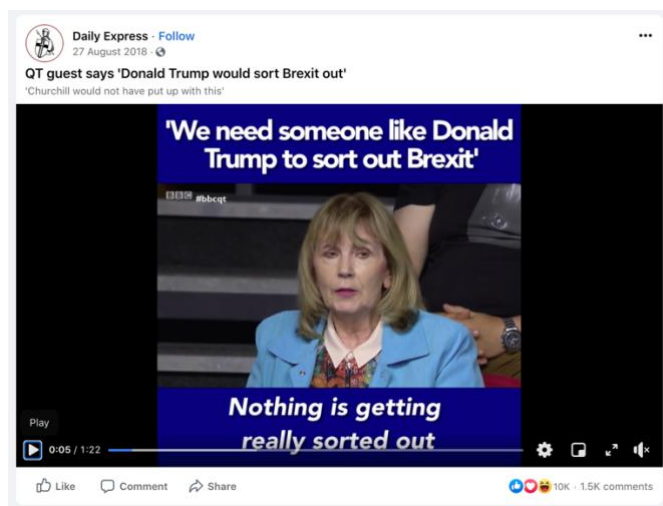


Figure 6: Image Shared by Kirk from a Facebook Page called ‘I’M A BREXITEER’



As noted in 2.3.2, right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist mobilisation has been described as increasingly transnational thanks to the globally-connected nature of the internet and social media (e.g. Davis, 2019; Froio & Ganesh, 2019). However, while many works acknowledge the transnational appeal of figures like Donald Trump and other self-styled ‘alt-right’ personalities, few seek to understand the nature of this appeal or to explore the existence of a transnational and mutually sympathetic community between Anglophone nations around discourses of Muslim civilisational threat and nativism. This sense of a shared white victimisation, framed in culturally racist and protectionist terms that toe the line between nationalistic hate speech and ‘acceptable’ patriotism, has undoubtedly been made possible on an unprecedented scale due to the affordances of social media. Lawrence’s case is telling: in his initial interview he spoke of having fallen out with friends from his hometown who did not understand what it was like to have to live with diversity on their doorsteps, but drew parallels with fellow beleaguered citizens overseas:

It’s a global invasion right now. America’s got it, France has, France is overlogged [sic] with it, Greece is ruined, Italy’s ruined, Germany’s ruined. So many of the, I mean, even Australia, I see the yellow vest¹⁴ protests marching in on Australia because they’re, everybody’s just had enough.
(Lawrence, interview 1)

¹⁴ The yellow vests, or *gilets jaunes*, is a French street protest movement that began in November 2018, at the height of the project fieldwork. It was sparked by opposition to fuel tax increases but developed into a broader anti-establishment movement, which saw it garner support in participants’ milieu and prompted small-scale copy-cat protests globally (Martin, 2018; Royall, 2020).

In this sense, even when one feels their views and experiences isolate them from their own countrymen, social media can provide international solidarity and community. The shared global whiteness produced through these discourses of invasion and cultural threat, and the subsequent enhancement of feelings of validation and ‘not being alone’ in one’s concerns, could begin to explain the significant appeal of these international issues and their enigmatic link to nationalism. This collective victimhood is then compounded by a narrative that has emerged in these milieus online with regard to censorship, embodied by the figure of ‘Tommy Robinson’, whose experience of online de-platforming and real incarceration generated support and outcry across the populist and nativist right not only in Britain (Allchorn, 2018; Pilkington, 2020, pp. 129–135) but also overseas (Halliday & Barr, 2018).

Such shared white victimhood was likely compounded by the antagonistic nature of the Facebook platform and social media more broadly. Conflict in offline protests has been described as solidifying a sense of collective identity in right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist movements (Asahina, 2019, p. 134), as a form of ‘collective effervescence’ (Durkheim, 1912). As noted in 2.3.1, social media platforms can provide an opportunity for those developing a ‘right-wing populist’ identity to ‘explore others’ reaction to one’s identity and have it confirmed in interactions, including hostile reactions that confirm one’s status as a critical outsider’ (Krämer, 2017, p. 1302). There has been much interest by communications, psychology and political science scholars in the effects of ‘incivility’ online (e.g. Hmielowski et al., 2014; Hwang et al., 2014, 2018; Kim & Kim, 2019; Wang & Silva, 2018) based on a broad consensus that online environments harbour some sort of propensity towards aggression in political discussion (Hmielowski et al., 2014 go so far as to claim an ‘age of online incivility’). This is not necessarily due to any particular ‘online disinhibition effect’ (Suler, 2005); we must also take into account the potentially increasing ‘incivility’ or ‘outrage’ in political discourse more broadly (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), the large amount of political content available online, and the logic of social media that shapes how we respond to it.

In the current study, conflict was indeed an integral part of participants’ described experiences on Facebook, indicative not only of the antagonistic logic of the Facebook environment, but also of the hostile and tribal nature of the contemporary political context of Brexit and broader ‘identity politics’. This conflict played out in the

Comments of particular Posts, as well as sometimes in Private Messages, and particularly occurred with strangers with whom participants disagreed or viewed as ‘the enemy’ in political disputes (i.e. ‘lefties’ and Remainers). The nature of this animosity is discussed in Chapter 5. While these altercations did often leave participants feeling attacked and abused, their pride in being able to ‘rise above’ conflict often transformed these encounters into moments of triumph or enhanced resolve. It is interesting to note that while the primacy of such conflict in participants’ interactions (and thus their constant exposure to opposing viewpoints) does not necessarily support the idea that social media are sites of ‘echo chambers’ (see 2.2.1), their experience is congruent with studies that claim such hostile interactions online promote defensive reactions and strengthen in-group resolve (Hwang et al., 2018; Kim & Kim, 2019; Wang & Silva, 2018).

In summary, in addition to a sense of control and value provided by the opportunity to ‘have a voice’ and contribute to ‘truth-telling’ on the platform, Facebook afforded and encouraged participants to connect with likeminded – and opposing – individuals that made for a sense of validation. While some participants were proud and active members of a Brexiteer community on Facebook, others simply felt the pro-Leave content they encountered there was reflective of theirs being a popular or majority standpoint. Their sense of victimhood was likely enhanced by their experience of hostility and animosity from ‘Remainers’ and ‘lefties’, as well as by encounters with content from other European and Anglophone countries where their concerns about rising immigration and cultural threats were shared. That is, the globally connected logic of Facebook that allowed them to share in a transnational whiteness, as well as the antagonistic nature of the platform, contributed to a sense of victimhood and solidarity that gave added meaning to their engagements there. As discussed in 4.3, this sense of validation was significant in the context of feeling their concerns had been treated as illegitimate by media and political actors preoccupied with political correctness and anti-Brexit ‘Project Fear’, alongside the context of a more protracted exposure to discourses of reverse racism and white victimhood and the dismissal of these discourses by those in power.

4.5 Where to next? Offline effects and sustainability of political engagement on Facebook

Participants' high levels of engagement with Brexit and surrounding issues online, and the great passion they exhibited for these topics, raise questions around how committed they were to such engagement, including whether it also occurred 'offline' and whether it would continue into the future. Although evidence indicated that the platform afforded and encouraged participants to become politically engaged in the abovementioned ways, discussions with participants also suggested that there were limitations to this political engagement and to its sustainability. Such limitations were in part due to the effect that this was having on participants' personal lives, including the stress they experienced, and the impact on their relationships with loved ones. Moreover, throughout the fieldwork, Facebook continued to announce increasingly strict censorship measures, including imposing permanent bans on prominent right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist personalities like Alex Jones and 'Tommy Robinson'. Thus, the continuity of participants' practices on the platform was not guaranteed. This section explores participants' experiences of these issues.

4.5.1 Translating 'online' to 'offline' engagement

It goes without saying that an individual's online and offline practices are not discrete from each other – digital platforms and technologies are not asocial arenas separate from embodied life, but rather are embedded in our 'offline' lived reality (Hine, 2015, p. 32). However, as acknowledged in 2.2.1, the relationship between 'clicktivism' (often used to refer dismissively to low-risk low-effort online political activities such as Sharing or Liking political content or signing online petitions (Halupka, 2014)), and committed political attitudes or offline political engagement is highly contested (Gamson & Sifry, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Y.-H. Lee & Hsieh, 2013; Lim, 2013; Rotman et al., 2011). Meanwhile, in Pilkington's (2020) ethnographic work with 'extreme-' and 'far-right' movements in Britain, all of her respondents were also engaged in some way online, and for many this online engagement had been a precursor to offline activity. In the current study, given that many participants became politically engaged for the first time thanks to the logic of Facebook, as outlined in section 4.2, it is apt to ask whether or not such engagement continued offline in the form of political participation and activism.

Although a handful of participants (Helen, Kirk, Jessica, and Olivia) said they had attended street demonstrations or other events around Brexit, ‘Tommy Robinson’ or Islam prior to or as a result of their political engagement online, many others had not. Reasons for this ranged from the perceived ineffectiveness of protest, to the likelihood of it resulting in violence or bad press, to simply their reticence to travel all the way to the capital to take part. As Fred told me, ‘I don’t attend any because I don’t think there’s a massive amount to be gained. I think the real danger is you’re always gonna get agitators in there who will try to turn things around from what the original plan was’ (interview 1).

In contrast, Lawrence in his second interview (in which he also told me he had recently been spending much less time on Facebook) enthusiastically showed me the ‘yellow vest’ he had had made with his own wording printed on it: ‘Brexit now: Destroy the corrupt’, and described how he had put a UKIP garden stake in front of his house in preparation for local elections because ‘I thought if I have my say it might make a few people think’. Judging by his demeanour at the time, the potential for expressing his political frustrations ‘offline’ clearly excited Lawrence, but actually attending demonstrations was still too difficult: ‘unfortunately London’s a hundred miles away and I have a lot of responsibility with my son’. Such cases demonstrate that the relationship between online and offline activities is more complex than a simple case of varying levels of commitment to a political cause.

Some participants said they felt their contribution was better made in a different form to street demonstrations. Several said they had stopped paying their TV licence as a form of protest against the BBC, and others had sent emails to the Prime Minister or their Member of Parliament, or letters of complaint to media organisations. Many said they were paid up members of UKIP, wanting to contribute monetarily and in the form of adding to membership numbers to increase party visibility; as Deborah described, this was ‘because I felt that they need to be built back up again, because I can’t see any alternative (...) Everything’s floundering (...) I’m just clutching at straws’ (interview 2). Olivia had even donated more than 1000 pounds of her own funds to ‘Tommy Robinson’s’ campaign. Others said they had not engaged in ‘offline’ protest activity, but felt they were doing their bit through their Sharing activity on social media. For example, Neil said he had not been involved with demonstrations ‘yet’ as he was ‘still

waiting to see what happens with Brexit' (interview 2). He told me he felt that people should get together and act rather than sit around and complain, but that he felt 'it's a bit late now for me to actively get involved in politics and things, you know, I'm 70 years old (...) but I can be part of a change. So I can work with other people on social media, to promote the message' (interview 2). In this way, the Share function on Facebook afforded him the ability to make a contribution which he felt his age might otherwise have prevented him from making.

Interestingly, some participants who had never been inclined to attend any kind of street demonstration before felt that given the current situation they were 'getting that way' (Mark, interview 2). Isaac told me somewhat cynically, 'I've warned the missus that if [Brexit doesn't happen] I'll be protesting this year [laughs]' (interview 2). He joked about staging a protest on the highway near his local area 'with a bomb' – reminiscent of the frustration Beatrice expressed in terms of getting people's attention (see 4.2) – but said more seriously, 'I don't know how, but I will definitely be more active in protesting' (interview 2). Isaac felt that the issue of Brexit was now at a critical point, almost three years on from the referendum, and that something had to be done to prevent the 'will of the people' being ignored.

Beatrice felt similarly compelled to take action. Although she had 'stood behind tables' campaigning at the time of the referendum, issues with mobility had made attending demonstrations impossible. However, she had seen details of the 'Brexit Betrayal March', a protest before an important vote on the Withdrawal Bill in parliament in December 2018 (BBC News, 2018b), 'come up' on Facebook. Now she had bought herself a foldable wheelchair and was busily preparing to attend this demonstration in London, the first march she had been on. She had taken on organising transportation for over a dozen local Brexiteers she had connected with on Facebook, and was producing flyers filled with facts and figures she had mainly collected from Facebook content (which she told me was not easy having been away from office-based work since retirement). To Beatrice, this demonstration and its context felt significant enough to prompt this level of action for the first time. 'This rally is the last opportunity for anybody to stop her [then Prime Minister Theresa May] signing away the country', she told me. 'It's one last roll of the dice basically' (interview 2).

4.5.2 Conflict and 'Facebook fatigue'

As mentioned in section 4.4 above, conflict was an inherent aspect of participants' political engagement on Facebook. The political perspectives with which participants often found themselves engaging on Facebook were at least contentious and at most radical. This along with the way in which the platform combines the political with the personal (e.g. Metz et al., 2020) meant that many participants' personal relationships were inevitably impacted by their political engagement there. Although some participants excluded face-to-face relations and personalised connections from their Facebook activity altogether (either deliberately or because their peers did not use Facebook), many other participants were connected on Facebook with a variety of friends, family and other 'offline' acquaintances, rendering the (at times controversial) content they Posted visible to these ties. In fact, participants' generally keen desire to spread these 'truths' to others meant that only one of them spoke of restricting the visibility of their political Posts. As a result, participants described a number of cases of conflict that had arisen in face-to-face relationships because of something they had Posted on Facebook.

This mostly occurred with more distant acquaintances or relatives, rather than with close friends. For instance, Deborah and Mark both described clashing with a son-in-law who challenged their views from a 'left-wing' or Remain perspective, but each said they had not let this affect their relationship with him; they had agreed to disagree. In Deborah's case, she had 'gotten into it with my son in law, big time', and her strategy for dealing with this was to remove this site of conflict by 'unFriending' him on the platform. 'I realise on certain political subjects we are never going to agree (...) and I think it's better that we don't get into it, so I've decided I don't want him to see my Posts anymore' (interview 1). She assured me this was not meant to symbolise a severing of ties 'offline', but was what she deemed necessary to avoid damaging their relationship or causing hurt to her daughter. In this way, Facebook was understood as an environment so inherently inclined to hostility that family members who might otherwise find maintaining relationships unproblematic face-to-face could not be trusted to put political passions aside there.

In Lawrence's case, however, such conflict *had* resulted in a severing of ties and caused him hurt and disappointment. When he fell out with old school friends on Facebook

who had accused him of racism there, he said ‘there was no love lost’ (interview 1) as they had already grown apart. However, he told me he *was* affected when one of his step-sisters, to whom he reached out on Facebook after the passing of his stepfather, strongly disagreed with his Posts regarding Brexit and eventually ‘removed herself from [his] Page’ (interview 1). Although they had not known each other very well beforehand, Lawrence stressed that this altercation and rejection was significant to him given that he had felt they were grieving together as family members and that he had tried to ‘accept them into [his] life to try and help them out a little bit’ (interview 1). He described this event as ‘very sad’.

In Neil’s case it was sometimes closer relationships that appeared to be affected. Neil’s online political engagement was particularly oriented towards conspiracy theories, and the content he Shared frequently received sceptical or critical responses from friends and relatives on Facebook. But he told me he regularly spoke about the information he had found online, with his group of friends at their weekly social gathering, eager to ‘keep them informed’. They would sometimes lose interest or become fed up, and like those who reacted sceptically and dismissively to his Facebook Posts, he was aware that perhaps ‘some of them think I’m a sandwich short of a picnic’ (interview 1). He had also had run-ins with a distant family member – who on Facebook had ‘accused [him] of being a lunatic’ (interview 2) and whom he eventually had to ‘unFriend’ – and told me this had caused some tension with his wife, who was concerned about the way this conflict might affect their relationship with the rest of the family. Exactly how this had affected Neil’s relationship with his wife was unclear. He mentioned she had also expressed unease with the amount of time Neil was spending researching alternative information online, but when I asked him about this he simply smiled and changed the subject. Neil was of a cheerful, optimistic demeanour and his approach was one of kindness and understanding rather than anger or resentment. He brushed these issues off, confident that his theories about the Deep State and globalism would be proven right in time.

Participants’ experience of regularly being confronted with hostility, alongside being constantly bombarded with varying degrees of upsetting political content, sometimes resulted in ‘Facebook fatigue’. Bright et al. (2015, p. 148) define social media fatigue as ‘a user’s tendency to back away from social media participation when s/he becomes

overwhelmed with information’, and this phenomenon has been identified among early adopters of social media (R. Fielding, 2011) and confirmed in Lupinacci’s (2020) phenomenological work with social media users in London. In the latter study, Lupinacci observed that participants were aware of the time and energy consumed by their constant ambivalent scrolling, the consequence of which she describes as generating a sense of ‘drowning in an endless informational flow’ (ibid, p. 14).

In the current study, this fatigue was particularly the case for those participants who spent several hours a day on Facebook, a practice afforded by their retirement, unemployment or self-employment. However, simplistic explanations of fatigue being a product of ‘information overload’ due to growth in social media content (e.g. L. F. Bright et al., 2015) or of growing privacy concerns (Logan et al., 2018) fail to recognise the impact of the emotional nature of the content being consumed. The fatigue experienced by participants in the current study was clearly related to their levels of frustration with regard to Brexit and other political issues they were engaging with on Facebook.

For Kirk, for example, it was the content he was viewing on the platform which led to his fatigue. For the past two to three years he had been using Facebook to engage with political content, several times a week for around two hours each time. His Wall was dominated by videos of violence at home and abroad, indicating the likelihood of the prominence of such content in his Newsfeed. In our first interview, Kirk told me he felt his own Facebook Posts had become increasingly angry over the past few years. As we sat down to begin his follow-up interview and I asked him how he had been since we last spoke, he told me he had been having trouble sleeping, and throughout the interview he alluded to the stress, anger and anxiety that engaging with this upsetting content brought him. Discussing politics, he told me, ‘it’s so much that’s mucked up, so much, it’s like, hundreds and hundreds of things that hit you every day, (...) and you think “that can’t be right, what’s going on here?”’ (interview 2). Kirk contrasted this with what things used to be like ‘before’ when ‘we’ll have a 5-minute discussion on that and forget about it’. He also described how he now feared constantly for the safety of his family – safety from terrorist incidents out and about in London, as well as from violence or vandalism they might experience at home or in his car ‘because people read my Posts and they don’t like me’ (interview 2). However, he told me that he would not

stop having his say on Facebook because of this – using Facebook to express himself and share the truth was too important. For Kirk, the distressing content he engaged with was not viewed as a particularity of his own algorithmically-derived Newsfeed, but represented ‘how the world is becoming’ (interview 2). This attitude again points to a low awareness of the algorithmically-filtered bubble within which participants used Facebook, but it is also indicative of participants’ feelings of hopelessness towards a perceived social decline and the way in which finding and exchanging content on Facebook sometimes represented what felt like the sole means by which to combat this.

When I saw them in the follow-up interview, some participants told me they were taking a break or a step back from their political engagements on Facebook, and before this thesis was completed multiple participants had disappeared from the platform entirely. Deborah said she was ‘taking a step back’ from her engagement with news on Facebook because ‘if you allow yourself to constantly get bogged down with [the variety of opinions regarding Brexit], it’s horrendous (...) I’m trying now to focus on positive points (...) and there’s very few of those around’ (interview 2). In his initial interview, Lawrence had told me, ‘When Brexit’s over I hope my life will change to a little bit more of a happy side rather than all this political stuff’. At the time of our second interview, he was excited about having started a new job which saw him step up to foreman supervisor, and the busy workload this brought had meant he had taken a step back from politics on Facebook. He said this had been ‘a good break’ from sometimes getting ‘too enravelled [sic] in it if I’ve got too much time on my hands’.

By the time of our second interview, Eileen was also alluding to the toll that spending so much time curating her Page was taking on her, and a desire to ‘unclutter my Page from politics and go back to (...) just living me life (...) go back to normal’. Beatrice also told me in her second interview that over the past week: ‘I’ve tried to keep off Facebook because it just winds me up’, although, as her above-described protest involvement indicates, this did not mean she had stopped engaging with pro-Leave politics.

In the context of Facebook imposing ever-stricter ‘Community Standards’ upon its users, another question that could be asked is whether or not participants would continue their political engagement or truth-spreading ‘mission’ online if they incurred a permanent ban on Facebook or could no longer use it in the same way. This in fact

did happen to Olivia, who was already prepared with user accounts on multiple other ‘free speech’ oriented platforms and did continue her activities there. Others like Neil and Fred said they would consider using other platforms. However, some participants were unsure about making the commitment to learn how to use another platform, or whether there was a point in using a platform where they would not be able to interact with so many other users. For Eileen, perhaps it was the above-described fatigue she was experiencing at the time of our second interview that prompted her to say,

I can’t see me doing this through another medium, (...) if I did get the hand forever for some reason, (...) I don’t think I’d start it up again. I think I’d just do something else, (...) I’d probably see it as a sign to shut up, get on with me own life, because I can still find out what’s going on [through other means]. (Eileen, interview 2)

The above description of the continuity and effects of participants’ online political engagement has a number of implications. While some participants had already participated in offline protest action, for many their political engagement seemed contingent upon the specific environment of the Facebook platform. The seamless ability to find and Share content from a variety of sources and in a variety of media formats provided by the logic of the platform meant that those who could not or had no desire to participate in demonstrations could feel they were contributing nonetheless. Furthermore, for those who said that if they were no longer able to use Facebook they may give up on their activities altogether, the connections and familiarity provided by Facebook as a ubiquitous social platform were significant to their political engagements. Conversely, in some cases the political engagements facilitated by Facebook also prompted participants to consider offline activities for the first time.

However, these engagements did not come without their sacrifices, creating stress and sometimes taking their toll on relationships. As passionate as participants were about Brexit and other issues, the long-term sustainability of these relatively new, and often highly involved, political engagements was brought into question. Of course, this engagement was occurring at a very specific political moment. Negotiations around the UK’s exit from the EU were underway but appeared to be failing, and fieldwork with participants was completed before Theresa May’s resignation and the comparative success of new Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s more hard-line stance towards the

demands of Brussels and of parliament – a stance and an outcome which was constantly called for in participants’ milieu. That is, although their concerns regarding immigration and ‘identity politics’ are no doubt unresolved, much of the passion that fuelled their political engagement was contingent on their frustration at their democratically legitimate demands being threatened by deadline delays and People’s Vote activists at the time, and may not have continued in the same way after 31 January 2020.

These accounts warn against drawing conclusions about the momentum of offline movements based on observable activity online. Online activities are relatively low cost and low risk (although when toeing the line of illegal hate speech using an identifiable online Profile the latter may cease to be the case). While participants’ online political engagement was meaningful to them in its own right, whether or not this translated into offline participation or a sustained engagement varied substantially.

4.6 Conclusion

As discussed in 2.4, a sense of political marginalisation has been identified as a factor in support of Brexit. However, existing empirical evidence of this comes from studies that focus solely on class-based sentiments (Koch, 2017; McKenzie, 2017a, 2017b; Walkerdine, 2020), with most other researchers who make such claims basing them on theoretical grounds (e.g. J. Clarke & Newman, 2017; Gilbert, 2015; Calhoun, 2016). A sense of marginalisation need not be class-based; nor need it be understood as only a factor *contributing* to individuals’ decisions to support Leave. It could also be a *product* of it, of positioning oneself against a perceived pro-Remain and pro-minority rights hegemony in legitimate political discourse. Participants’ narratives around their political engagement practices on social media, including their trajectories towards engagement, and practices of finding and Sharing information, demonstrated a palpable sense of disempowerment that underlay these online practices, of having their concerns dismissed or ignored. Their assertions that they were ‘not political’ or had not been political before could well have been performances of political modesty (Moss et al., 2020, p. 846), but may also have reflected a sense of not having a valid or effective ‘voice’ in politics, or of seeing politics as not for them. Perhaps, as Eliasoph (2003) has argued of the US context, they felt politics had become too narrow a realm for discussion of the issues that they perceived to be affecting their lives, and thus tainted.

Perhaps they saw Nigel Farage and his party as changing this, by bringing the ‘(wo)man-on-the-street’ and what were perceived to be (her/)his concerns into the mainstream political spotlight in the lead-up to the referendum. For many participants, Brexit represented an opportunity to engage in politics, crystallising as it did a variety of existing concerns around nation, race, belonging, sovereignty, marginalisation, and disenfranchisement. For some participants, it may have been the increasing legitimacy of anti-refugee and anti-Islam sentiment, in the context of the European ‘migrant crisis’ and the threat of violence by ISIS, that began to embolden them to have a ‘voice’. However, traditional media outlets, like politicians, did not appear to represent them or their views, or provide them with the ‘truth’ about the political issues that concerned them. Facebook, on the other hand, provided an empowering means with which to engage with these issues.

Thus, within this context of felt disempowerment, political engagement on Facebook gave participants a means with which to re-empower themselves – to take back some control, by both finding alternative narratives and by spreading these ‘truths’ to others. It also gave them a sense of feeling valid or valuable, as they encountered others with similar views, both locally and globally, and had their sense of victimhood validated by conflicts with ‘Remainiacs’ and ‘left-wingers’. Facebook came to play this role in their lives because of the way the platform is designed. Its logic – namely the way it encourages a culture of Sharing, obscures the nature of its algorithmically-driven content, functions as an alternative news provider, and promotes global connectivity and antagonism – both afforded (that is, enabled) and encouraged (that is, prompted) participants to engage in the practices they did. These included both passive and active practices; automation allowed participants to seek knowledge efficiently and without the need to wade through the vast quantities of information on the world wide web, while the culture and affordances around Sharing meant they could have a voice, participate in the distribution of information for political purposes, and control how they did so. Above all, Facebook provided them a platform for finding and circulating alternative narratives, without which most participants would not have ‘started on this mission’ (Beatrice, interview 2).

However, as noted above, despite not having been engaged in politics prior to their social media use, most participants did not simply experience a radical change of heart

after encountering content there. The content they engaged with and the ways in which they interacted with it reflected pre-held grievances, doubts or discontents. According to participants' narratives of their trajectories, this content was powerful because it spoke to their personal experiences (notwithstanding the potential that they had reinterpreted these experiences to a degree *post facto*). This multifaceted perspective on political engagement and its underlying motivations challenges techno-determinist views of online radicalisation, polarisation, and disinformation like those discussed in Chapter 2. That is, participants' accounts demonstrate that it is not possible to understand the impact of social media on contentious politics without a holistic approach that takes into account not only the technical environment but also socio-political context and the complexity of lived experiences.

Although in many cases participants were extremely involved in their online political engagement, it was unclear how sustainable this engagement was, as constant conflict and the emotional nature of the engagement was resulting in Facebook fatigue for some. Whether or not participants would continue their engagement outside of Facebook, including participating in offline activism, varied. At times these reluctances to participate offline highlighted the significance of the affordances of the platform to participants' political engagements: finding and Sharing content online allowed them to focus on spreading the word in curated ways aimed at seizing and maintaining people's attention and could be integrated into their daily routine without the need to travel to demonstrations or come face-to-face with potentially violent conflict.

Nonetheless, what was clear was that for most participants this political engagement had significantly changed their lives. As Deborah aptly summarised regarding Facebook,

Is it absolutely perfect? Does it solve, is it the answer to everything? Is it going to replace the media, which I wouldn't trust as far as I can throw?
No. But it's an alternative, and it's an alternative that I'd hate to lose.
(Deborah, interview 2)

The following chapter turns to the narratives at the heart of participants' online political engagements, which shed further light on the relationships between these online

practices, the content of the politics with which participants were engaged, and their wider experiences, attitudes and lives.

5. ‘Everything’s geared against us’: Accounting for pro-Leave stances through narratives

5.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 2, there is still relatively little understanding of sentiments around the Leave vote beyond quantitative analysis that links it to concerns over immigration. The limited research that has sought the voices of individuals has primarily focused on working class experiences of marginalisation. In this chapter I explore participants’ narratives in order to contribute to a sociological understanding of pro-Leave sentiments of Facebook users. This focus on narratives stems from the interpretivist epistemology of the project which assumes that the starting point for our investigations should be the meaning-making of the research subjects themselves. Narratives are key to meaning-making; as Margaret Somers (1994, pp. 606, 614) points out, ‘it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world... people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives’. Thus it is through narratives that we come to understand our identities and our own place in the world (see also Hammack, 2011; Steinmetz, 1992, p. 496).

Narratives are also an integral part of ideological identification (Haidt et al., 2009), and researchers have studied their role in, for example, hashtag activism (Yang, 2016) and the legitimisation of ‘counter-jihadist’ movements (Kundnani, 2012a). As noted in 2.3.2, Hogan and Haltinner (2015) studied the construction of immigration threat narratives and found that they drew on a ‘playbook’ of right-wing populist accounts that was shared transnationally. In his influential study of local anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalist sentiment, Hewitt (2005, pp. 57–58) identified ‘counter-narratives’ that challenged official narratives about diversity and that depicted residents as racist. This specific form of narrative, which challenges dominant media accounts, is particularly important to those who do not feel their views and agendas are reflected in these media (Hackett, 2016, p. 14).

In the case of pro-Leave Facebook users, such narratives have the potential to be particularly vital, as social media have been described as ‘an emergent territory for digital storytelling’, integrating text, videos, images and audio (Venditti et al., 2017, p.

S274). As Page (2018) argues, social media enable the co-creation of ‘shared stories’ on a large scale. Papacharissi and Trevey (2018, p. 93) note that one of the primary features of ‘affective publics’ (see 2.2.3) is that they ‘typically produce disruptions/interruptions of dominant political narratives’. Furthermore, as pointed out recently by Polletta and Callahan (2019), there is still inadequate understanding of the interaction between lived experiences and media consumption when it comes to the construction and utilisation of ideological narratives. Research thus far has constructed a mutually exclusive binary: individuals are either ‘duped’ by implausible media accounts; or their ideological narratives are based on personal experience alone. Challenging this, Polletta and Callahan demonstrated how a narrative of white middle class oppression was constructed among Trump supporters in the US that integrated information from both the media that supporters consumed and their own personal experiences. The multiple methods approach of the current study lends itself particularly well to examining narratives between media consumption and lived experience.

Throughout interviews, participants in the current study accounted for their pro-Leave stances by reciting strikingly similar narratives to each other and to those observed in the content they Shared on Facebook. In this chapter I answer Research Question 3, which asks how participants made sense of their pro-Leave positions. I do so by examining the content of these narratives, and the links, consistencies (and inconsistencies) between them. I argue that these narratives cohered around a metanarrative that centred on power and control, specifically an agenda from above to force ‘left-wing’ change. This metanarrative exhibited direct links to far-right conspiracy theories, but was not reducible to them. The narratives employed by participants, emerged from a combination of their media consumption and their everyday experiences and perceptions, demonstrating the complex intersection of media consumption and lived experience.

This chapter begins by sketching the overall elements and plot of the metanarrative that emerged from the data analysis, before examining the salient narratives that comprised this and the way in which these were employed by participants. It is important to acknowledge that understanding the accounts drawn on or shared by participants as ‘narratives’ does not inherently render these explanations any less meaningful to

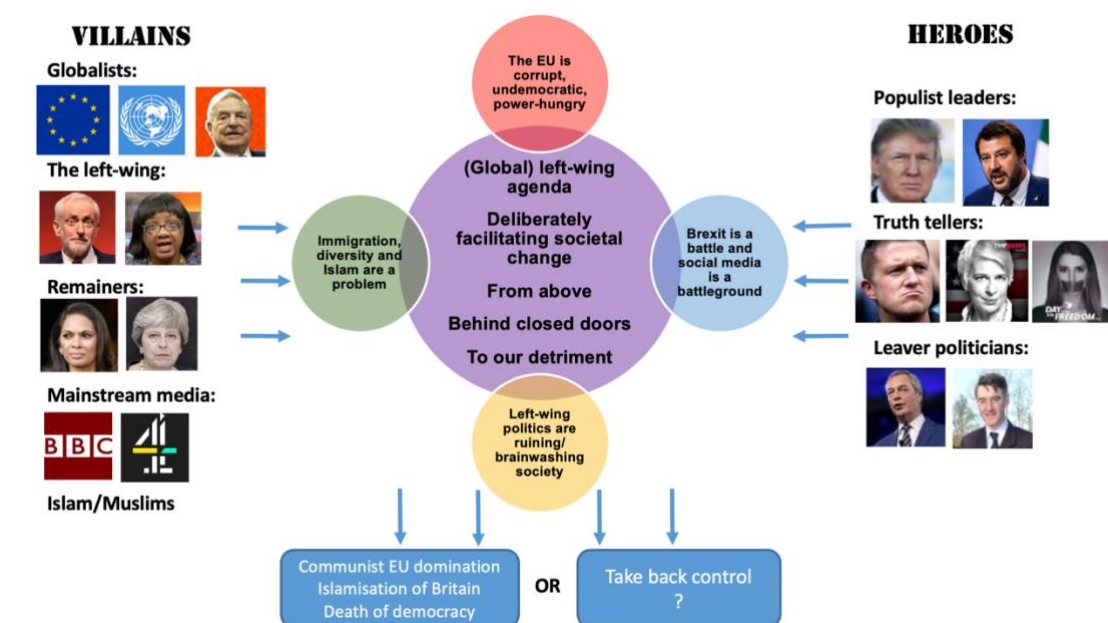
participants, negate participants' agency, or imply anything about the factualness of these narratives (evaluation of which is outside the scope of this research). It simply acknowledges the integral discursive role that narratives play in social and political life and sense-making.

5.2 A hidden agenda to control 'us': The pro-Leave metanarrative

Metanarratives are those 'in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history', including 'the epic dramas of our time: Capitalism vs. Communism, the Individual vs. Society' and 'progressive narratives of teleological unfolding: Marxism and the triumph of Class Struggle', etc. (Somers, 1994, p. 619). Participants in the current study were observing and making sense of the world in this same teleological sense, locating their perceived predicament within a broader historical drama or struggle. In fact, it was this awareness of supposed wider historical implications that motivated many of them to become politically engaged online (as explored in Chapter 4), and which perhaps separated them from less radical and committed pro-Leave Facebook users and other Leave supporters.

A variety of narratives were referenced by participants, and each participant had their own foci or motivations which they linked to their personal experience or situation. However, it was possible to identify an overarching metanarrative linking these narratives and giving broader meaning to the relations between the array of accounts employed. This is illustrated in Figure 7 below. The metanarrative centred on power and control, namely that there exists a (global) 'left-wing' agenda that is deliberately facilitating or forcing societal change, to the detriment of real, common or ordinary people, whose needs and wants the metanarrative claimed to know and represent. This 'left-wing' change was purportedly being imposed from above, against 'our' wishes, and while the EU was emblematic of this, it was joined by a range of broadly drawn categories of political and cultural actors: the villains of the metanarrative. Just as the metanarrative had its victims and villains, it also had its heroes, represented as stoically fighting to protect the victims by standing up to the villains, in the face of persecution by them and their collaborators (simultaneously rendering these heroes victims also).

Figure 7: Visual representation of the metanarrative



Whether this agenda was to rob ‘us’ of our sovereignty by subordinating ‘us’ to a dictatorial master, impose communist social engineering, supplant ‘us’ with non-white inhabitants or replace ‘our’ culture with Islam, the key was that it was orchestrated and carried out behind closed doors, against ‘our’ will, and with sinister aims. Thus, ‘we’ were being robbed of control over our destiny.

Participants maintained their role of virtuous victim through ontological narratives (Somers, 1994, p. 618) in which they made claims to their own nature as ‘not racist’ or discriminatory, or as hard-working and noble-hearted individuals. They also constructed themselves within the shared ‘us’ by asserting that they ‘knew’ or ‘had the feeling’ – based on what they had seen on Facebook or sometimes the conversations they had been having offline – that their views were representative of the majority of Britons. Participants’ use of ‘us’ and ‘our’ when describing the victims of the metanarrative alluded to the racialised categories of belonging employed by this metanarrative in the making sense of participants’ life-worlds. Frames of entitlement and demonisation were employed that were nativist (see 2.4.2), culturally racist and

Islamophobic (see 2.4.3). The metanarrative shared representations of power with conspiracy theories and populism (see Bergmann, 2018), and the idea of an imagined collective under siege from above was also congruent with the category of ‘the people’ identified in populist discourse (see 2.4.2). In particular, the way the content of this category remained undefined or an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 2005, pp. 67–128) contributed to its ‘illusory appeal’ (De Genova, 2018a, p. 360).

A temporal dimension can also be identified in which a trajectory of decline was alleged to exist within British society. The past was depicted as a more positive time than the present, and the future as inevitably worse, unless ‘we’ acted now. A coming climax to the plot – the crucial point at which ‘we’ would either triumph over evil or all would be lost – was constantly being redefined (e.g. December 2018’s Commons vote on the Withdrawal Bill, the European Elections of May 2019, or the various EU exit deadlines). When the promised crescendo was not reached on each date, the climax was reconfigured. Within the metanarrative these were not simply milestones but judgment days upon which the fate of ‘our’ struggle, and even the future of the world, rested. The imperative to ‘fight’ or ‘act’, by finding and Sharing information on social media, afforded the victims the potential to take back control from the villains of the plot.

The evaluative criteria (the fundamental principles and values) which ordered and gave meaning to the elements of the metanarrative (Somers, 1994, p. 617) were primarily conservative values, such as traditional family and gender roles and patriotism, along with nebulous universal (Western) values such as democracy, freedom, and ‘common sense’. This was contrasted with ‘loony left-wing’ pushes to normalise deviant or depraved behaviours, and political systems perceived to rob individuals of democratic freedoms, such as socialism and communism. The link between such depictions of the left and conservative evaluative criteria is not novel; for many decades these depictions have been deployed in the cultivation of hegemonic conservative values (A. M. Smith, 1994, pp. 42–43).

This metanarrative demonstrated strong links with far-right conspiracy theories, which provide clear narratives with which to structure the world in a Manichean way (B. Lee, 2020, p. 348), and cast one’s group as the victim of other more powerful groups (Smallpage et al., 2020, p. 265). Participants also made explicit reference to conspiracy theories like ‘cultural Marxism’, the New World Order, and the Kalergi Plan (see 2.3.2).

However, most participants were not conspiracy theorists per se – they employed narratives selectively and in relation to their quotidian experiences. These narratives did not form one coherent conspiracy theory, but varied in the degree to which they related to each other and overlapped with the metanarrative. For instance, whether or not participants had more than a superficial understanding of the concept of Marxism, terms like ‘cultural Marxism’ and ‘communism’ were used interchangeably to symbolise participants’ interpretations of elitism, control and social engineering.

The narratives that made up this metanarrative are explored in the following sections. Although the stories that emerged cohered around common threads, they were also often incoherent; their targets and logic shifted in ways that were at times conflicting, and these conflicts and inconsistencies were in themselves revealing. However, in essence the moral of the story was the same: that ‘we’ were victims of ‘them’, and that this was wrong and had to stop.

5.3 Narratives about the EU

Although participants connected their pro-Leave stance to a variety of issues and concerns both domestic and international, unsurprisingly narratives about the nature of the EU itself were drawn upon heavily in justifying the desire to leave it. Overall, these narratives portrayed the EU as something ‘we’ were better off without, either because it was exploiting Britain financially or because the organisation was corrupt, power-hungry and undemocratic. Concerns about ‘control’ featured heavily, whether this control was economic, legal, cultural, or simply symbolic. These narratives are unpacked below.

5.3.1 ‘They’ve milked us’: Exploitation and economic decline in the EU

One narrative common to participants’ accounts was that Britain’s membership in the EU had been economically detrimental. This narrative made particular reference to industries such as fishing, as well as the idea that membership in the EU had been responsible for the international relocation of manufacturing, to the detriment of British industries and jobs. For example, Jessica said that when she began her online research she had uncovered ‘the fact that our fishing industry had been decimated’ and ‘all our factories had left the UK’ (interview 1).

In the narrative, this denigration was not simply incidental nor related to wider global economic movements. It was the result of Britain having been exploited and stifled by the EU. Lawrence, spoke of his own steel industry as well as fisheries, saying that, ‘we own all the water around our own Great British Isles but yet we’re controlled by the EU [as to] how many fish we can catch (...) Where’s the sense in it?’ (interview 2).

This narrative also particularly resonated with Fred. He repeated an anecdote from his personal experience in both of his interviews and mentioned that he had employed it in debates on Facebook to demonstrate that membership in the EU had ‘certainly not benefited Britain in any way, shape or form’ (interview 1).

Me ex-wife used to work for Twinings (...) [The factory was] performing superbly. European Union came along and gave a bribe (...) to move the factory to Poland (...) They made all the workers redundant (...) The Polish workers insisted on more money, smashed the machinery up, so Twinings tea, having a 300-year-old history in Britain, now comes from China (...) All because of Europe trying to move British industry to Europe, and they've been doing that for the last 40 years. More and more manufacturing has been taken away from Britain and put into Europe.
(Fred, interview 1)

This anecdote exemplifies the way in which narratives about the EU were made meaningful to participants by relating them to their personal experience. Fred also noticeably refers to Britain and Europe as separate entities and alludes to a discontent at wider processes of globalisation and their effect on local communities and national traditions, placing the blame for this on deliberate interference.

Fred also attested that the EU had ‘milked us for everything that they can’ (interview 1). As the narrative went, the objective of the EU was a sort of Robin Hood approach; to take from the rich and give to the poor in order to even out the economic standing of member countries (linked to portrayals of the EU as ‘communist’, which are addressed below). But this, the narrative went, meant that Britain was unfairly penalised. Comments by Helen capture well the shared sense of outrage over this.

Oh, it’s horrendous (...) I mean we are the biggest net contributor after Germany. We’re the ones that have got crumbling NHS, a shortage of

school places, massive potholes! Look at Poland. New hospitals, new roads. Don't get me started. We're a cash cow. (Helen, interview 2)

Here, Britain was being punished for its success, despite this success no longer being reflected in participants' experiences of public services. There was also a common assumption that without exploiting comparatively rich countries like the UK, the EU would not be able to survive financially. In fact, the EU was portrayed by participants as a sinking ship, both economically and socially, and one which it would be better for the UK to abandon, or risk being dragged down with it. As Eileen put it, 'They're looking for excuses to keep our money pouring in (...) They don't care about Britain' (interview 2).

5.3.2 'A load of gangsters': The EU as morally bankrupt

A prominent narrative, seen in comments like Fred's and Helen's above, was that the EU was a corrupt, elitist and undemocratic organisation. A key aspect of this narrative revolved around salaries and extravagant spending within the European Parliament (on office buildings and travel, for example), and was evidenced by the claim that the EU had 'never had one set of accounts signed off' (Eileen, interview 1). Kirk expressed his disgust: 'When you read about what the EU are giving politicians and all this sort of stuff, (...) they're nothing more for me than a load of gangsters that are just lining their own pockets' (interview 1).

In this narrative, the EU and the 'bureaucrats in Brussels' were 'unelected' and 'unaccountable' (Neil, interview 2). This tied in with the notion that the EU was attempting to rob the UK of its democratic sovereignty through overregulation and a hunger for authoritarian control. In this narrative, the EU was frequently portrayed as a bully. This incorporated concerns about being forced to join the Eurozone, the prospect of an imposed centralised taxation system, and forced conscription into a planned EU army. This was of particular concern to Beatrice who said:

My grandchildren will be part of the EU army, (...) they've already signed away that (...) [They] will be conscripted into the EU army. And nobody, nobody will be able to do anything about it (Beatrice, interview 2)

In particular, the EU was ‘forcing us to take more and more people’ (Lawrence, interview 1). Kirk for instance told me of a story he had seen on social media claiming that then Home Secretary Sajid Javid had let in 400,000 migrants ‘through the back door’, but blamed this on EU membership ‘because being in there you feel that in the back rooms of some place they’re saying you must take a quota in’ (interview 1). Concerns centred around the perceived ability of the EU to force the UK to take migrants from *outside* of Europe, particularly undocumented migrants or asylum seekers. This was in line with observations by Gupta and Virdee (2018, p. 1750) that within the context of ‘long-simmering sensitivities’ and concerns over accommodation of religious, cultural and racial difference intensified by the ‘migration crisis’ of 2015, ‘the EU is increasingly held to be an apparatus for supporting immigration and the accommodation of difference’. Importantly, as alluded to by Kirk above, this control was secured deviously and/or secretly.

5.3.3 The federalist agenda

An extension of the narrative that the EU was deliberately robbing the UK of its sovereignty was the idea that the European project itself constituted a long-term plan to create a federation or ‘superstate’, doing away with nation-states altogether. More sinister versions of this narrative were explicitly linked to the New World Order conspiracy theory, extending beyond the EU in a plot to remove all national borders (see 2.3.2). Lawrence summarised his understanding of this plot as follows:

New World Order is the political elites, the banks, war, oil, you know, it’s all governed by one, one world force really. And I do honestly believe that the EU is trying to create one European solid state, with no democracy, everybody being controlled like they’re just ants, all currencies being the same, et cetera, et cetera. (Lawrence, interview 2)

In this narrative the EU’s perceived socialist agenda represented ‘communist’ and, by association, totalitarian aspirations. While some participants referred to such aspirations as hidden in the Lisbon Treaty which was to come into force in 2022, others spoke of a ‘Kalergi plan’ for forced multiculturalism in Europe that, it is claimed, was devised in the early 20th century (see 2.3.2). Despite using this term both in interviews and in the Facebook content they Shared, participants were not necessarily aware of its origins in

a decades-old white nationalist and anti-Semitic conspiracy theory (de Bruin, 2017). They employed these narratives in ways that made sense to them. For instance, Eileen compared the EU's aspirations to the sci-fi film and novel franchise *The Hunger Games* in both of her interviews and in some of the content she Shared, using the analogy to demonstrate the sinister 'communist' nature of the EU:

[In *The Hunger Games*] there was a parasitic elite, living a great life, (...) and then each section (...) was devoted to industry or farming or growing or cattle, but the people in these areas were poor, they had nothing. That's the only way the EU will go. If it survives. Because it's communist. And communism doesn't work. (Eileen, interview 1)

Eileen's analogy dramatises the narrative, casting it as a conflict between good and evil. She also recited a quote attributed to European integrationist Jean Monnet saying "the peoples of Europe should be guided towards a super-state without actually realising why. This (...) can be disguised as having economic benefit" (interview 1). Within such narratives, the people of Britain are victims of an act of deceit, orchestrated and carried out covertly and undemocratically.

In summary, the narratives employed by participants about the EU represented it as a corrupt, undemocratic, and power-hungry organisation. Britain's membership in the EU was detrimental because its economy was being exploited, to the EU's 'communist' ends. In the more sinister versions of this narrative, the EU was part of a covert 'globalist' plot to force the acceptance of immigration and the amalgamation of nations into a 'super-state'. These narratives contributed to the metanarrative in which Britain and British people were victims and the EU and its bureaucratic elites were villains. It mobilised nostalgia for a past time in which 'we' were in control of our own laws and destiny, in part echoing the findings of Campanella and Dassù (2019b) outlined in 2.4.1. Those who collaborated with or facilitated this agenda were also 'traitors', demonstrating again the link with the metanarrative plot of good against evil.

5.4 Narratives about migration and diversity

Unsurprisingly given findings outlined in 2.4.3, narratives about migrants and migration featured prominently in participants' interviews and Facebook content, with

Islam and Muslims often presented as uniquely problematic. These drew on a variety of culturally racist and Islamophobic tropes that have predated recent Euroscepticism. However, in these narratives the EU was not only presented as a cause of increasing migration, and as in decline because of large numbers of the wrong sorts of migration, but as just one actor in a wider agenda to facilitate or deliberately orchestrate increased global migration. In this sense, leaving or standing up to the EU was merely one, albeit very important, step towards reducing undesirable migration flows and fighting the effects of multicultural policies seen as discriminating against white Britons and imposing unwelcome cultural change.

5.4.1 Getting along as impossible

Participants repeatedly made reference to what can be understood as ‘differentialist racist’ narratives (Balibar, 1991; Barker, 1981; Taguieff, 1990) about the purported impossibility of ‘excessively’ diverse societies to cohere or get along. These narratives portrayed peaceful coexistence with Muslims as particularly challenging. Such narratives of inter-group antagonism as human nature have recently been popularised as racist logic by (highly-criticised; see Lentin, 2018; Louis, 2020; Gillborn, 2019) public intellectuals like David Goodhart and Eric Kaufmann.

While for some it was the speed of change that made racial and ethnic diversity problematic, for others it was the content of that change or the fact that it was being imposed rather than occurring ‘naturally’ or with popular consent. Many participants claimed to speak for the majority of Britons or ‘many others’ when they described a natural frustration, discomfort or alienation caused by increasing diversity, or the increasing visibility of Islam in society. With regard to Islam in particular (problematisation of which is explored further in 5.4.4), this discomfort is consistent with Leonie Jackson’s (2018, p. 14) claim that in Islamophobic ideology, ‘Muslims are the living bearers of an immutable “Islamic culture”, which conditions their psychology, behaviour and actions in a fundamentally different way to members of other cultures’, making tension the inevitable result of mixing (see 2.4.3).

One participant who was particularly preoccupied with demographic change – which she felt had happened ‘almost overnight’ – was Deborah. In her initial interview, she spoke of her concerns over the ability of British society to adapt to such rapid change:

‘... it takes time to integrate people into society. There isn’t the time. Suddenly you look around and there’s so many, for example, women in burkas, that a lot of us are not comfortable with’ (interview 1). Her problematisation of the visibility of Islamic dress in particular alluded to a narrative about the Islamisation of society which is discussed in 5.4.4, but also echoed the notion that the introduction of too much cultural or religious diversity is naturally discomfoting. Deborah spoke about pictures of London in the 1950s or 1960s that she had seen on Facebook, how the city was now ‘unrecognisable’, and that a ‘massive influx’ had ‘just upset the whole thing’ (interview 1). Combining this with her personal experience of change in her local community and referencing Enoch Powell, she constructed a ‘rivers of blood’ narrative: ‘Maybe he didn’t couch things very well, but he was right. He warned about the overdoing of immigration. And this is what’s happened’ (interview 1).

Eileen, who spent time holidaying in Austria every year, used the country’s integration policy as an example with which to contrast Britain’s perceived dysfunction.

Austrian values come first, (...) safe, prosperous, everybody has a job, everybody’s polite, everything’s shut on a Sunday, (...) the society’s working, and it’s not because they’re cruel and austere. It’s because they’re sensible (...) If you’re there because your country’s at war, that’s fine – we will shelter you (...) You don’t get to just stay on and linger around. And you have to speak German. What’s wrong with that? That’s gonna make the society work. They’ve got people there from Syria who are doctors, they’ve got people there who are in the construction business, because they fitted in. (Eileen, interview 2)

Here, not simply too much diversity but too much of the ‘wrong’ sort of diversity was the problem – i.e. that brought by asylum seekers or Muslims – combined with too much accommodation of minority beliefs and cultures. Implicit in this comparison with Austria is the idea that British society is not ‘working’ in this way, as immigrants here are not ‘fitting in’. As a result, British ‘values’ are felt to have suffered in some way, alluding to the idea of decline that is a fundamental aspect of the metanarrative. The assertion that these values should ‘come first’ reflects a nativist view which also works to essentialise Austrian (and British) culture.

This sometimes manifested as a ‘clash of civilisations’ narrative in which Britain (or the West more broadly) was represented as essentially Christian and thus fundamentally at odds with Islam, a common trope of recent right-wing populism in Europe (Brubaker, 2017a). Jessica summarised this sentiment:

Most of the migrants are from Muslim countries, and Islam is virtually the opposite to Christianity, (...) at the end of the day, the European continent is a predominantly Christian culture, where we don't agree with, you know, child marriage and we don't agree with killing people because they don't believe in something that you believe in... (Jessica, interview 1)

More radically, some participants suggested that such disharmony was being deliberately facilitated for sinister purposes. Speaking of the United Nations Global Compact for Migration (known in the milieu as the ‘UN Migration Pact’) in her initial interview, Jessica described a ‘Marxist’ plot to increase immigration in order to divide communities and ultimately ‘bring down Europe’. She, along with a number of other participants, used the term ‘war’ or ‘civil war’ to describe the imagined inevitable end point of this clash, an image which engendered a sense of panic or urgency.

Participants constructed narratives of a coming clash, painting a picture of a country on the brink of civil unrest because of ethnic and cultural diversity. These narratives portrayed certain continental countries like France, Germany or Italy as being in chaos thanks to Muslim and/or African immigration. The same narratives could be seen in videos Shared by participants on Facebook depicting large groups of African-looking males running, yelling or generally causing havoc. Kirk was particularly concerned about such violence:

Some of the stuff that's happening, with the gang raping (...) and all that, (...) we ain't got quite to the place where it's like a tinder box that's gonna blow up, (...) fighting in the street and, it ain't got to that yet but I can see it in the next couple of years (...) like France with ‘yellow jackets’... (Kirk, interview 2)

Thus, in Kirk's view, the apparently out-of-control situation on the continent that he saw depicted on social media was where the UK was headed if we remained in the EU.

5.4.2 Migrants as deviant

Migrants in general, and undocumented African, Muslim, or, sometimes, Eastern European migrants in particular, were associated with criminality and deviance. This was in line with Gupta and Virdee's (2018, p. 1756) analysis of UKIP and other Eurosceptic party manifestos, in which "“criminals” were predominantly “foreign”, and “terrorists” were invariably “foreign” and “Islamic”, and were imposing upon and corrupting (infiltrating) the authentic citizenry'. However, the discourses of such parties are not new, but are in fact endemic to an age-old culturally racist trope in which 'culture' is used as a 'synonym for “race”' (Garner, 2010, p. 134) and 'cultural deviance and backwardness' is attributed to ethnic and racial minorities in order to legitimise their exclusion (ibid, p. 137). Anecdotal evidence from nations of continental Europe was used to demonstrate how letting in too many of these people had led to a breakdown in law and order and outbreaks of terrorist incidents. Most participants referred to social media content they had seen when employing this narrative. For example, Kirk was scrolling through his Newsfeed during his initial interview and found an amateur video of an incident at a railway station in South London in which a man was roaming the platform brandishing a machete before being tasered by the British Transport Police. He told me,

He's obviously a migrant, (...) I guarantee he's African, because there's certain looks, and the way they dress and everything else (...) You think to yourself, 'what's he doing in this country?' (...) you can't let everybody in because first thing they do is throw away, they've got no identification, you know? (Kirk, interview 1).

Kirk's comment reveals the racialisation of the category of migrant through his conflation of 'migrant' with 'African'. As De Genova (2018b) argues, the figure of the migrant is inevitably racialised in European contexts, particularly within public discourse around the 'migrant crisis'. Meanwhile, this encroachment of deviant migrant figures for Kirk was strongly linked to the idea of societal decline identified in the metanarrative; he told me that when he was growing up the only warning his father ever gave him when he went out to play was 'mind the road', but now he was forced to worry about the safety of his wife, children and grandchildren out and about in London because of the risk of terrorism:

And that ain't right, really, in your own country, is it? (...) outside agencies from foreign countries, making you feel unsafe (...) and [my wife] she goes 'oh you're paranoid', but that's how it, it makes you paranoid. (Kirk, interview 2)

The kind of migrants who had been 'let in', or who we had been forced to let in, were contributing to lower levels of safety in Britain, according to Deborah who described these as 'unmonitored, criminals, beggars', who had 'done absolutely no good for this country whatsoever' (interview 1). Eileen, who received dozens of messages weekly from her Facebook Followers, recounted the stories of two elderly individuals who had contacted her about no longer feeling safe in their neighbourhoods, saying that it was sympathy for such situations that motivated her to continue spending so much time 'blogging' about Brexit and immigration. One was now the 'only white woman in this street' where she had lived 55 years, and would no longer leave her house after dark. Another felt she could no longer sun herself on her front porch because,

the Bulgarians come out at night, and they all sit in the street, and they have wrestling matches and quite often they're drunk and they fight properly, and draw knives on each other (...) That's why I believe in Brexit. We should control who's coming. (Eileen, interview 2)

The harrowing experience driving home from Calais that Eileen relayed in her interview (see 4.2) and the way she related this to a subsequent 'realisation' that Europe was effectively under siege, is also indicative of the notion that immigration was a threat to safety in Britain. In addition to her observations regarding the accommodation of minority cultures in continental Europe, like many participants, Eileen described content she had found online regarding the violent effects of the recent migration crisis on continental countries. One business in Italy, according to a video on Facebook, had

been vandalised 52 times by hordes of migrants (...) It's a beautiful little place, and these maybe 20 Africans come in with sticks, (...) nick some food, go in the till, (...) smash everything and run out again. You can't live like that (...) We're not at war. (Eileen, interview 1)

Such undocumented African arrivals were understood to be mostly young men, in a narrative that depicted asylum seekers and migrants in general as opportunistic.

Participants expressed sympathy with ‘real’ refugees, a discursive strategy which allowed them to maintain claims to their own morality while justifying taking a hard line on queue jumpers who ‘travel through five countries, six countries so that they can come to Britain [for] a lovely, nice, easier life’ (Mark, interview 2).

5.4.3 ‘Charity begins at home’: Nativist entitlement

Closely linked to this was the narrative that high levels of immigration placed an unsustainable burden on social infrastructure at a time when Britain could ill afford it. While social services were being cut and poverty and homelessness were evidently on the rise, ‘charity begins at home’ (Audrey, interview 1) and the government should be looking after its own first, a distinctly nativist perspective (e.g. Sanchez, 1997). Here we again see the metanarrative of the ‘majority’ as victimised, as in this narrative new migrants were unfairly prioritised in the distribution of social welfare. The outrage described by participants at cuts to essential social services sometimes appeared to overlap with traditionally ‘left-wing’ economic demands, revealing an inconsistency in the generally anti-socialist metanarrative. However, their gripe with socialism was more cultural than economic, and as De Vries (2018) argues, in recent years a left-right divide in stances towards the economy exists separately to a ‘cosmopolitan-parochial divide’ in stances towards European and global integration, and immigration.

As has been identified in previous studies of anti-immigrant sentiment (e.g. R. Hewitt, 2005), participants repeated rumours about new migrants receiving vast amounts of financial assistance from the British government. For example, Carl, a van driver, told anecdotes about moving ‘brand new’ furniture and PlayStations for ‘African’ migrants who he claimed had received these items for free, along with multiple brand-new cars and bicycles. He contrasted this with his experience of childhood when he ‘had nothing’, and his current situation in which he worked long hours ‘to pay for migrants to come over here and get free benefits. Why can’t I get benefits? (...) I’m working my fuckin’ arse off here, and I’m literally born here’ (interview 2). He also related this to visible poverty, expressing outrage at this injustice: ‘I’m not jealous – I think we should just be fair (...) If I see kids on the street with no food, fucking feed em! Don't give all our money away and then say you've got nought to give me’ (interview 2).

Audrey, Lawrence, Mark and Helen also made reference to levels of homelessness and hunger, which they had witnessed in real life as well as on social media. Northwest-based care support worker Audrey lamented, ‘You can’t have everybody in the world living in our country (...) We have our own homeless people, and children and soldiers and old people, and I have to look after old people who barely survive’ (interview 1). Concern for the National Health Service (NHS) also featured prominently in this narrative, as did pressures on schools, housing and other essential infrastructure. Several participants drew on common sense logic to describe how a system such as the NHS was designed to be used by those who had spent their lives paying in, and the idea that exploitation of this through things such as ‘health tourism’ was rampant. This echoes analysis by Fitzgerald et al. (2020) about the link between nationalism, racialised and heredity-based welfare structures, and the NHS in Brexit’s campaign messaging. Beatrice was particularly exasperated as she linked this to a narrative of social decline and widespread discontent in Britain:

I think that’s where a lot of Brexiteers come from, (...) looking after your own, you know. Fighting for your own (...) and now suddenly they want to give it all away (...) And then you’re wondering why the whole country’s going to the dogs, and everybody’s angry, because they can’t get into hospitals (...) they can’t get into schools, they sit on the motorway for hours on end (...) and yet, ‘let’s invite more people.’ [cynical laughter] It doesn’t work! (Beatrice, interview 2)

Helen also drew on a nativist distinction between ‘deserving’ Brits and ‘undeserving’ new arrivals when recounting an anecdote in her follow-up interview:

We are paying for people that are now retired that have come to this country that have hardly ever worked (...) I see it every day (...) I got kicked out of a bloomin’ consulting room at the hospital, cos it was the only consulting room that had got a special telephone where they could get hold of an interpreter to bring this little woman in a sari with her entourage (...) I was going in for a procedure. I was quite nervous about it (...) Just gets me so angry! And I mean, that costs us a fortune. (Helen, interview 2)

Helen's account implies that her nervousness over the procedure she is about to undertake should have taken precedence over the language needs of the other woman; in the consulting room and in Britain, she was there first. The cost of the procedure she herself is about to undergo is inconsequential as she is entitled to the provision of universal health care as a native Brit. However, the interpreting service required by the other woman to receive the health care she needed was perceived as an illegitimate expense. Her ethnicity and inadequate linguistic competence meant her status as an undeserving new arrival who had not contributed to National Insurance was assumed a priori. Being 'native' was an all-important criterion for deservingness, while the fact that Helen herself was not currently working seemed to have been deemed irrelevant. Such narratives of the 'unfairness' of multicultural policies represent the endurance of discourses of 'reverse racism' that have been used to justify anti-immigration sentiments in Britain for decades (e.g. Beider, 2015; R. Hewitt, 2005; Rhodes, 2010; Wells & Watson, 2005, see 2.4.3).

However, it should be noted that the 'charity starts at home' narrative was used not only to account for opposition to immigrant-focused welfare, but also to justify participants' opposition to spending on foreign aid. This illustrates the way in which participants' indignation towards governance extended beyond issues of ethnic diversity, as is explored in 5.5.

5.4.4 Islamophobia and narratives of Islamisation

While participants were often anxious to assure me that they were not 'racist' and used a variety of discursive strategies to absolve themselves of this accusation (a 'credentialing' practice key to cultural racism, (e.g. Barker, 1981; Miles & Brown, 2003) and identified in a number of empirical works (e.g. Flemmen & Savage, 2017; Mann & Fenton, 2009; P. Martin, 2013; Millington, 2010; Wells & Watson, 2005)), the role of villain in the narrative often shifted from those at the top responsible for immigration levels to migrants themselves, and Muslim migrants in particular. Although not all participants were concerned about Islam or Muslims, the majority of concerns expressed around immigration were in fact code for concerns around Muslim immigration. This is in line with literature reviewed in 2.4.3 which stressed the centrality of the figure of the Muslim to anti-immigration politics in Britain today.

Essentialist and racialised depictions and familiar Islamophobic tropes were used to construct Islam and Muslims as problematic and ‘wrong’. These included that Islam oppressed women, promoted paedophilia and homophobia, and that it was a violent or ‘war-mongering’ religion (or, more commonly, ‘ideology’). Radical Islam and Islamist terrorism were often conflated with Islam and Muslims more generally. Participants also made frequent reference to the ‘grooming gangs’ issue, the cruelty of halal slaughter, and treatment of Islamic apostates. Importantly, the idea was not simply that the beliefs and practices of Islam were problematic, but that Muslims were intent on imposing those beliefs and practices on British society in order to ‘Islamise’ it.

One of Carl’s comments in his initial interview was illustrative of a position expressed by many of the participants: ‘I’m not racist, but (...) I have got a problem with Islam, or radical Islam anyway, and Islamists, I have got a problem with that’ (interview 1). Repeated reference was made to a narrative in which Muslim immigrants were intent on imposing their beliefs and practices, when in fact it was ‘them’ who should be changing to suit ‘us’. As Lawrence lamented, ‘Why, why are we having Islam forced down our throats? Why is everything about the Western world having to change right now to suit everybody else?’ (interview 1). This comment illustrates not only concerns over Islamisation, but a related nativist perspective on cultural integration. It also reflects the idea that this was not only a national but a global or civilisational issue in which there was a binary between ‘us’ (the West) and ‘everybody else’ (see Brubaker, 2017a).

Audrey drew on an analogy that has become a familiar trope in justifying concerns like these (Jackson, 2018): the delineation of ‘guests’ from those who have a right to claim ownership of the country and to make decisions about social norms. She said,

Everybody, when they live in this country, they agree to our laws. But they seem to bring a lot of theirs over, and we’re having to agree to theirs, and that’s wrong. (...) When I go in somebody else’s house, I don’t say to them, you have to do what I want (...) I have to be respectful. When they come to live in your country, they’re not. (Audrey, interview 1)

Audrey made scant explicit reference to Islam or Muslims, but this comment was made in reference to a rumour she had heard that someone who exposed the ‘grooming and

raping [of] girls' went to prison while the perpetrators walked free. The normalisation of discourses around perceived Islamisation and the encroachment of Shari'a law also make it clear which group she was likely referring to, and similar concerns were echoed by several other participants.

Particularly salient to this narrative was the problematisation of Halal slaughter. Participants spoke of social media content they had seen, and which some also Posted on their Facebook Wall, 'exposing' the sale of unmarked Halal meat in mainstream supermarkets, the serving of it in restaurants, and ritual slaughters in local backyards. They argued that non-Muslim consumers were being forced to specify their requirement for non-Halal meat, where Halal should be the special requirement that deviated from the norm. Such narratives of imposition by Muslims allowed participants to go beyond simple critiques of Islamic practices (e.g. on the basis of animal rights or gender equality) and employ concepts of fairness, their own 'right to choose', and the forced degradation of their own (superior) cultural practices, in order to legitimate their claims. As Deborah expressed,

There is a very strong feeling on Facebook, and it won't go away, that this is an extremely backward culture, and we will not accept it. And we feel that we have had to lower our sights with Christianity in order to accommodate it. (Deborah, interview 2)

Islam's treatment of women was also represented as especially problematic, primarily by female participants. Practices of veiling and female genital mutilation were of particular concern. These narratives reflect the recent utilisation of progressive and feminist frames in Islamophobic logics (Rhodes & Hall, 2020, p. 288; see 2.4.3). Participants made reference to Conservative MP Boris Johnson's (then recent) infamous comments about veiled women looking like 'letterboxes', saying for example, 'These women are suffering (...) As a civilised country we should be giving these women an excuse to take it off' (Eileen, interview 1). Deborah made comments that represented not only the idea that Islamic cultural practices around women were problematic, but also that this was having an undesired effect on 'our' country and culture.

There's a huge dichotomy now on women trying to still gain equality, not to be sexually assaulted or abused, and then we look around and we see women coming into the country that we feel cover up because (...) that's (...) what they've been led into. They don't have freedom of choice, which a lot of us don't feel comfortable with (...) [Things like] female genital mutilation, we don't want that sort of thing here, but we have no choice. (Deborah, interview 1)

Both Helen and Olivia repeatedly referenced a narrative of Muslims as a danger to Western women, and they used multiple examples from their personal experience and experience as mothers to illustrate this. Olivia, who described the issue of Islam as her main 'topic' on Facebook, told of a River Nile cruise in Egypt with her daughter, when even 'on a so-called "good" boat with a good company', she said, 'one of them attempted to rape my child' (interview 1). Helen told me in her initial interview how her daughter had been followed home in their local area, as well as goaded in a Muslim-looking area of Bordeaux on holiday. She also gave an anecdote about her niece moving in with her Muslim boyfriend's family, the language of which revealed an implicit negative understanding of Islamic culture, as something contaminating:

She's a strawberry blonde, pale, blue eyes, freckles (...) Next thing we knew she was wearing their type of clothing, not the black stuff but the sari type stuff, that's heading in that direction. Dark brown hair. She'd even darkened her eyebrows. Thank God we got her out of it. (Helen, interview 2)

Kirk was particularly concerned about the number of mosques he heard (on social media) had been built in London in recent years. He recounted the same anecdote in both his initial and follow up interview about a video he had seen on Facebook of a congregation in a mosque claiming to be 'moderate' but all raising their hands in support of violent and radical practices. Thus, Kirk's horror and outrage at the building of 'hundreds' of new mosques in London can be linked to his consumption of a narrative that mosques are breeding grounds for extremists, and alludes to the symbolic significance of this in terms of a perceived eclipse of Britain's predominantly Christian culture. He described how his concerns had been affirmed by content that had appeared on his Facebook feed:

They all go to one area (...) I feel like it's a cancer (...) they get on the council, (...) and they start running it and then they get more Muslims (...) I was thinking that and then low and behold, a thing on social media pops up with a Imam (...) and he's saying to another guy (...) 'we've gotta get more Muslims in here, they've gotta have loads of children, populate the area, (...) ' It's a hidden agenda behind what they're doing (...) In my head a lot of, was that sort of thought that in years to come my grandchildren, so you know, I've gotta stand up and say something now, to try and stop it. (Kirk, interview 1)

Kirk's concern about his grandchildren 'in years to come' illustrates the link between narratives of Islamisation and a sense of panic or urgency to do something about it. Their agency over this undesired societal change could be reclaimed only if 'we' acted now. As can be seen here, language and imagery easily shifted from the country being 'changed' to being 'taken over' or 'invaded'. This narrative of an impending Islamic takeover was also referenced by Olivia who described 'the *allowed* Islamic takeover' as her 'biggest concern' and asserted that 'Islam *will* dominate (...) They breed like rats anyway' (interview 2, Olivia's emphasis). Beatrice, who also gave Islam as her primary concern, told me that 'tak[ing] over the world' was Muslims' 'whole intention', and that 'we're letting it happen' (interview 2).

Interestingly, narratives linking Islam or Muslims to national security threats or holding them responsible for challenging violent extremism, as identified in existing literature on Islamophobia (e.g. Kundnani, 2007; Matthews, 2015, p. 270), were referenced only by a small number of participants. These were far less prominent than narratives of cultural incompatibility or concern of an Islamisation. Thus, for this participant group, issues of control over cultural change were particularly significant. This echoes Swami et al.'s (2018) finding that the symbolic threat of Muslim immigrants was associated with intention to vote Leave, and that this relationship was mediated by conspiracist beliefs about Islam in Europe.

In summary, narratives that problematised immigration featured prominently in interviews and in the content Shared by participants. In these culturally racist, nativist and Islamophobic narratives, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity had engendered a decline in British society by disrupting the harmony of an imagined homogeneous

Christian British culture, or by facilitating a takeover by Islamic values. Here, the villains responsible were both politicians and ‘migrants’ themselves, particularly Muslims.

5.5 Narratives about the left-wing opposition

As noted in 5.3, participants reproduced narratives about the EU being ‘communist’, and an agenda of ‘cultural Marxism’ was a concern to many. In fact, the perceived incorporation of the cultural demands of ethnic minorities was not the sole social change about which participants expressed concern, but was in many instances understood as merely a symptom of a broader push towards the left in which ‘political correctness’ took precedence over all else. Participants drew on narratives about ‘the left-wing’, often assumed synonymous with their Brexit-arena adversaries, ‘Remain’. Negative representations of these groups were used to advance claims of a plot to mould society to their Marxist vision. The following sections examine these narratives in further detail.

5.5.1 ‘You name it, they’ve got a “phobe” for it’: Poor character of ‘left-wing’ and ‘Remainer’ individuals

Individuals labelled as ‘left-wing’ or ‘Remainers’ featured as central villains in the metanarrative and were portrayed as morally bankrupt, deviant and vindictive, as well as irrational and over-sensitive. This was juxtaposed against Leavers, centrists or right-wingers (‘us’) who were represented as moral, rational, evidence-based and the victims of online harassment. Almost all participants were able to recount a personal experience of having received abuse from ‘lefties’ or ‘Remainers’ on Facebook, in response to something they had Posted that was condemned as ‘racist’ or similar. These individuals were portrayed as instigators, who (unlike ‘us’) commonly used ‘vile’ language in hysterical tirades of abuse, which participants found shocking. As Deborah described, ‘I mostly communicate with likeminded people because I don't mind having a discussion on Facebook, but I’m not in the market for a stand-up fight, because some people can be absolutely vitriolic’ (interview 2).

Participants also used anecdotes of personal experiences offline to evidence these claims. For example, Helen told me how her daughter was bullied at school after it

became known that she supported UKIP. She described the culprit as: '[Her] mummy and daddy have split up, (...) always going on about how she hates men (...) lives in a gated house, (...) daddy bought you a car but she hates men' (interview 2). This description is demonstrative of a representation of 'lefties' as hypocritical, intent simply on criticising others, as well as privileged. Helen referenced this again with regards to the issue of 'white flight': 'The people that criticise people that have got opinions on immigration, never ever live in those areas. (...) They don't travel on public transport, they don't get the feeling as though they're a stranger in their own land' (interview 2). This group were 'do-gooders' (Audrey, interview 1) who simply wanted to 'take the moral high-ground' (Eileen, interview 1).

This poor character was also seen as extending to violent tendencies, particularly when it came to street protests. In this narrative, balaclava-clad Antifa members and their extreme tactics were representative of the 'left-wing' in general: prone to temper tantrums and willing to stop at nothing to have their way. Olivia told me about a video she had seen on Facebook in which a young American boy on a school trip wearing a MAGA (Make America Great Again) cap¹⁵ was verbally abused by an older man: 'My gosh, he was vile towards this child. I mean it was just shocking. But, this young boy, he just stood there, he said nothing, (...) he just looked at this, abhorrent left wing...'. She went on to tell me about the content of Comments regarding this: 'I mean the things they were saying online! "Shoot the kid", "kill the kid", "cut the kid's head off", "put him through a shredding machine." It was just vile!' (interview 1). This description was emblematic of narratives about the depravity of those on the left, in contrast with the dignity and superior moral character of those on the right.

Having taken to the streets herself on several occasions in support of Brexit or opposition to Islam, Olivia also had anecdotes from her personal (offline) experience. She described groups like Hope Not Hate and other 'left-wing Corbynista types' as chanting things like 'you f-ing Nazi scum', and claimed policemen had warned protesters against approaching these groups because they were known to be 'aggressive' and 'violent' (interview 2). A similar narrative was constructed by a number of other participants.

¹⁵ Generally red, these caps have become a symbol of support for Donald Trump since their use in his election campaign in 2016.

‘Lefties’ and ‘Remainers’ were also portrayed as unwilling to accept facts that did not support their left-wing or Europhilic stances, and as far more emotional than rational (this is explored in Chapter 6). In addition to being sore losers when it came to the referendum result, they were arrogant, automatically condemning as wrong, racist or ignorant any stance that challenged their own. For example, Mark described his frustration at feeling talked down to by liberals: ‘I can’t believe how people can be so outrageously pompous (...) It’s not their opinion so it can’t be the right opinion’ (interview 2). After reflecting that alt-right commentators like Ezra Levant and Candice Owens were ‘calm and measured’, Helen contrasted this with the ‘rude’ behaviour of those on the left: ‘They’ll just revert to name-calling, i.e. racist, bigot, homophobe, transphobe – you name it, they’ve got a “phobe” for it’ (interview 2).

Individual outspoken left-wing commentators also regularly appeared as villains in these narratives, including Guardian journalist and activist Owen Jones (often depicted as a crying baby) and LBC radio host James O’Brian (portrayed as a bully for his aggressive on-air interviewing tactics). Anti-Brexit MPs and other politicians seen as left-wing were similarly the targets of disdain, and the terms ‘treasonous’ and ‘traitor’ were commonly used on Facebook to describe such individuals.

Another set of villains in this narrative, thanks to their socialist politics, were then leader of the Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn and Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott. A minority of participants were critical of the media’s treatment of Jeremy Corbyn or took an anti-Israel view that allowed them to sympathise with his stance towards Palestine for example. However, there was a general consensus that, despite his previously Eurosceptic stance and seeming ambivalence, a Jeremy Corbyn government would be the worst thing that could happen to Britain. Corbyn was portrayed as a terrorist sympathiser and dishonest man, as well as uninspirational. Meanwhile, Diane Abbott appeared as a bumbling buffoon and typical bleeding-heart agitator, in thinly-veiled misogynistic and racist narratives which could be said to reflect those in mainstream media (Gabriel, 2017).

The idea that the Labour Party’s position on Brexit was inconsistent was also referenced, but it was interesting to note that this was far less prominent than representations of individuals and critique of socialist policies. This points to the significance of anti-communism to the metanarrative, and the way in which pro-Leave stances and the

narratives that surround them comprised a complex set of target concerns. Participants used phrases like ‘the *current* crop in (...) Labour’ (Carl, interview 2, emphasis added) or ‘it’s gone mad *now*’ (Isaac, interview 2, emphasis added) and some spoke of personally turning away from the Labour Party, indicating again the idea of a trajectory whereby our current situation was particularly dire, and things had got worse compared with the past.

The prominence of the leftist villain personifies the importance of the notion of imposed ‘left-wing’ change to the metanarrative. It was also arguably a symptom of intense ‘affective polarisation’. As noted in 2.4.1, Hobolt et al (2020) have used survey data to demonstrate that since the referendum, Brexit-based identities have generated affective polarisation (Iyengar et al., 2019), which involves not only strong emotional attachment to either the Leave or Remain position, but also antipathy and distrust towards the opposing group. Such affective polarisation constitutes more than differences in political viewpoints; it generates social identities. These identities ‘collapse otherwise multiple and cross-cutting intergroup differences into one single difference that becomes negatively charged and used to define the “Other”’ (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 18). In polarized societies, both politics and society are increasingly narrated as a matter of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, and ‘mechanisms of dehumanization, depersonalization, and stereotyping all contribute to the emotional loathing, fear, and distrust of the out-partisans’ (ibid, p. 23). At its extreme this polarisation can lead to each opposing camp questioning the moral legitimacy of the other and viewing it ‘as an existential threat to their way of life or the nation as a whole’ in a Schmittian-styled existential struggle (ibid, p. 19-21). By this definition, participants’ demonising narratives certainly exhibited an intense affective polarisation, not only in terms of Brexit as Hobolt and colleagues identify, but also along a (culturally) left-right divide. Furthermore, it could be argued that the way in which the ‘left wing’ was sometimes depicted even more negatively than migrants or Muslims demonstrates that support for Leave had come to be underscored by more than nationalism, cultural racism and Islamophobia (albeit disagreement over these ideologies were not unrelated to the construction of this division).

5.5.2 ‘The lunatics are taking over the asylum’: Minority rights and the normalisation of deviance

Participants also made reference to the idea that ‘left-wing’ agendas were deliberately normalising deviant aspects of society, tipping the balance too far in the ‘wrong’ direction and forcing unnatural social change. They invoked common-sense logic to justify their confusion at and opposition to these liberal changes. For example, Carl expressed his frustration and bemusement regarding ‘diversity’ agendas, connecting those around gender and ethnicity:

All this gender crap, (...) is just totally rubbish (...) Before, a man was a man and a girl was a girl. It’s annoying me when you see, like that video I saw what I told you about before with the children all dressed up in yellow, (...) I’ve just been to Citizens Advice Bureau, and there was four pages asking me name, me gender, date of birth, me address. And then, the next paragraph, the ethnicity. I didn’t fill em in (...) I don’t think it’s got ought to do with anything’ (Carl, interview 2)

Feminism was also objected to as part of the ‘left-wing’ agenda, and deemed representative of a class of raging, patronising snowflakes. In Deborah’s follow-up interview, I presented her with a Post she had Shared about lace boxer shorts for men. She described this as ‘utter madness’ and went on to say,

I sometimes think there are certain factions in this world that want to turn us all into asexual worker ants, you know? No! I like the division between men and women. (...) And they’re eroding that. I don’t see why men can’t be masculine and women feminine (...) Let’s applaud the difference. Absolutely. I don’t want my men in lace drawers [laughs]. (Deborah, interview 2)

To Deborah the issue of effeminate underwear is not a private decision of individual attire, but rather is symbolic of the perceived erosion of masculinity within society. This is equated with a feminist movement that she understands as seeking not to improve opportunities for gender equality but to erase all gender difference and, ironically, limit men and women’s ability to choose to be masculine and feminine, respectively.

Importantly, this is not a social process that simply happens, but is being done to society by ‘certain factions in this world’.

Alongside feminist agendas, the LGBT rights movement was also portrayed as villainous. This was often presented as an issue of child protection, with many participants making reference to the idea that the acceptability of gender fluidity and homosexuality was being wrongfully taught to young children in schools. Controversy over gender-free toilets (topical due to President Trump’s revoking of guidelines introduced by Barack Obama in the US (Trotta, 2017)) was frequently referenced in justifications, with transgender individuals portrayed as likely to take advantage of this to prey on women. Much like narratives around minority cultures, the idea was that these minority concerns were being ‘pushed’ or forced onto children from too young an age.

We shouldn't be having these conversations with children until they start asking the questions themselves. (...) I didn't wanna know about that stuff when I was 7, 8, 9, 10. They're shoving it down bloody primary school children's [throats] now. I don't want some gay pride birthday cakes and stuff like that, putting ideas into their head. (Helen, interview 2)

This moral panic over the potential to go beyond simple acceptance and end up promoting homosexuality exposes an implicit negative value judgement surrounding homosexuality. Acceptance of minority sexualities was sometimes depicted as a slippery slope, with the left so consumed by their desire not to offend that they failed to recognise harmful forms of sexual deviance and in fact went as far as promoting these. In her follow-up interview, Helen recounted some content she had recently seen on social media where ‘a drag queen child has been photographed with a naked male drag queen’ and asked ‘where is the outrage from the left on that?’ before linking this to lack of outrage over ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ (interview 2).

These narratives sometimes confused and conflated homosexuality with transgenderism. However, while most participants were quick to claim their acceptance of homosexuality, few could understand or support transgender rights, as Lawrence’s comment exemplifies:

This is where I think the world's going totally mad yeah? (...) We all have a choice of choosing which gender we want to be today (...) And in some ways, (...) being homosexual, being lesbian, OK, we all accept that today, yeah? But this thing about [sighs] this thing about parents being able to say that their son who was born is actually a girl, they're gonna call it this name, it's like, what is it doing? (Lawrence, interview 2)

Much like narratives about migration, narratives around gender and liberal change were occasionally linked to insidious conspiratorial global agendas, most explicitly by Neil, who told me that 'ludicrous' new Californian regulations to ban the use of 'he' and 'she' were 'all part of the one-world order global agenda of Agenda 21' (interview 1).

Issues around gender politics were also found alongside and intertwined with narratives about the left-wing's race-relations politics, as can be seen in Carl's comment at the start of this section. In participants' minds, these were all part of one problem or agenda by one 'left-wing' movement. When it came to ethnic minorities, these agendas were described as patronising to and limiting the 'potential' of these individuals, a logic typical of post-racial or 'colour-blind' discourse (Lentin, 2014). Black individuals were accused of playing the 'race card', both in Britain and in the US, in order to deflect criticism, or to attain success illegitimately. For example, Mark told me that the position of Diane Abbott was particularly bothering him: 'She just has the worst interviews I have ever seen in my life. And to me that's a case of political correctness gone mad (...) People are laughing at her, (...) but nobody would dare to take her out of that position and that's ridiculous' (interview 1).

Deborah told me that she felt 'very strongly' that deliberate representations of all categories of minority groups in television soaps was 'like the lunatics are taking over the asylum' and was part of how 'most of us are manipulated in some way' (interview 2). In her initial interview she said that 'it's as if somebody is working in the wings, trying desperately to make all people equal'. As already mentioned, this pushing of a 'left-wing' agenda was sometimes referred to by participants as 'cultural Marxism' (see 2.3.2). Helen was particularly concerned about this, which she said she thought had come from the 'Frankfurt School'. When I asked her what 'cultural Marxism' meant to her, she explained it thus:

Uh, I think it's the um, deconstruction of everything that held, holds society together. The smashing of the nuclear family, the pushing down our throats of the LGBT-XYZ whatever uh, group, groups. Um, if they wanna be that way that's how they are, yes let them get on with it, but why do we need to be fed it for breakfast, lunch and dinner? (Helen, interview 1)

This description reflects the way in which the concept of 'cultural Marxism' served as a way to link minority rights agendas to the threat of communism and the deliberate breakdown of the 'natural' structure of society.

'Left-wing' agendas and identity politics were also sometimes framed as a problem of reverse-racism, in that they allegedly furthered marginalisation of white people and deepened a sense of white victimhood. This frame is familiar to scholars of cultural racism and post-racial discourses, as it has long been used to criticise multicultural policies (e.g. Fenton, 2012; P. Martin, 2013; Rhodes, 2010). Deborah insisted, 'There *is* racism against white people! And that's another reason people are getting ticked off' (interview 1). Carl linked this to a loss of 'identity'. After telling me how his local community had transformed from being 'lucky if I saw a black person' to 'couldn't even bump into a white person if I wanted to', he said,

And the culture, the diversity, may be OK for some people. It isn't for me. Because, I'm losing my identity. White people now are saying 'well, if you're white you're racist just for being white. Why can't you be black?' Well I was born white, wasn't I? (Carl, interview 2)

Thus, the recognition of white privilege by anti-racist mobilisations was understood not as part of an effort to rectify race-based disadvantage and further equality, but as a personal recrimination. For Carl, this misunderstanding seemed to stem from a lack of acknowledgement of the existence of such disadvantage. Like Helen, he 'certainly [did]n't know what white privilege is all about' (Helen, interview 1), having had a very difficult childhood and being forced to do everything 'on me own' (Carl, interview 1) from a young age.

5.5.3 ‘They don’t want people educated’: Institutionalised brainwashing and censorship

Much of the problematised attitudes and phenomena described above were attributed to a kind of brainwashing through ‘left-wing’ propaganda. This was exemplified by Mark’s response to my question why he thought certain individuals would want to ‘betray’ Britain over Brexit. After struggling at first to articulate himself, he concluded:

...over the last 40 years, all we’ve heard on news medias and things like that is political correctness (...) and a lot of these people are so far ingrained with this political correctness that, that um, they can’t think anything different. (...) They actually think that the political correctness and like, let’s have open borders and let’s (...) give away British sovereignty to Europe and things like that, (...) they actually do believe that that’s what the majority think. (Mark, interview 2)

This brainwashing was seen as all-pervasive, but had one of its major roots in the education system, particularly universities. This explained why youth, especially middle-class youth, were particularly prone to ‘left-wing’ ideology and pro-EU sentiment. University lecturers and academics were portrayed as part of (or paid off by) the patronising liberal elite. Today’s universities were dumbing down students rather than promoting intelligence, and were teaching young people to ‘kick off’ (Eileen, interview 2) about things and silence dissenting ideas. As Fred described,

University lecturers are without a doubt indoctrinating the students into EU, into [pro-Hillary] Clinton (...) And a lot of young people who’ve gone to the universities (...) really believe in their heart and soul (...) that the EU is better. (Fred, interview 2)

However, it was the ‘mainstream media’ (a juxtaposition with social or alternative media, but mostly used to refer to television news) who were seen as playing the largest role in the left-wing brainwashing machine. As Kirk put it, ‘The media have done more damage to this country and all countries I think, because they think they know best and (...) they try and brainwash you’ (interview 1). This brainwashing was able to succeed because ‘still the majority follow mainstream media’ (Olivia, interview 1), which was ‘feeding them left-wing anti-democratic stuff all the time’ (Beatrice, interview 1). Talk

shows such as BBC Question Time were used by participants to exemplify a ‘left-wing’, pro-EU bias and a failure by the public broadcaster to represent the views of pro-Brexit constituents in its guests and studio audiences. Fred articulated this narrative with reference to the BBC’s programming and attributed this to a deliberate brainwashing agenda:

BBC especially, they are so anti-Brexit, I mean it was ridiculous. (...) At the time of [the] Brexit [referendum], even ordinary plays and comedies were putting over (...) an anti-Brexit message. (...) They've used programme after programme to try to brainwash the public into fearing Brexit. (Fred, interview 1)

Within the nebulous category of ‘mainstream media’, the BBC was a particular target, perhaps due to the long history of accusations of political bias that have been aimed at the outlet from both sides of the political spectrum (Tumber & Ayton, 2014). The public broadcaster status of the BBC meant a hand-in-glove relationship between mainstream media content and the governing class was often assumed, demonstrated by Mark’s comment: ‘The BBC’s an absolute disgrace (...) It’s actually highlighted it, how politicians are so unrepresentative and how, and how the media, I can’t stand it...’ (interview 2). Or, as Carl plainly put it, ‘The media are complicit with the government’ (interview 1).

The TV license fee was used in this narrative as further evidence of the villainous nature of the mainstream media machine – not only were ‘we’ fed propaganda, but ‘we’ were forced to pay for the privilege. Many participants attested that they would henceforth refuse to pay the fee, portraying this as a valiant and canny form of protest, and this was also promoted in Facebook content they Shared. The idea that the BBC received funding from the EU was also repeatedly used as evidence of its pro-EU bias (a narrative linked to the portrayal of the EU as corrupt outlined in 5.3.2).

Participants described a perceived deliberate attempt by not only the BBC but other channels like Sky and Channel 4 to promote panic over Brexit or leaving the EU without a deal, often using the term ‘Project Fear’. The sorts of claims that seemed to be coming out on a daily basis like ‘medicine’s gunna grind to a halt’, (Fred, interview 2) and ‘we’re not gunna have anybody to work in the NHS. Who’s gunna cook our curries?’

There's gonna be no flowers for Mother's Day', (Helen, interview 1) were portrayed as ridiculous speculations by unqualified and disingenuous 'experts', or even deliberate lies. Kirk lamented the way that such predictions were rarely challenged in these programmes, saying 'you never ever get the other side of it' (interview 2).

Several participants Shared a video of pro-Leave Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg reprimanding a Channel 4 journalist for using the term 'crash out' in an interview on the basis that it was inflammatory, and this was subsequently reflected in participants' justifications:

...but Channel 4, I'm fed up of them cutting people off. (...) I'm fed up of the actual presenters or the people doing the questioning saying 'when we crash out,' (...) We don't know what's gonna [happen]. (Mark, interview 2)

In this narrative, the problem with the 'mainstream media' was not limited to Brexit but was a decades-long issue; the 'mainstream media' was part of the same left-wing bias and pervasive culture of political correctness outlined in the above sections, and this agenda was inextricably linked with Brexit. As Helen attested, 'I coulda written the headlines the other night. They'll be Brexit bashing, Boris bashing, Trump said a naughty word, and uh, "there's too many white people in parliament"' (interview 1).

Explanations for this ranged from the media going overboard in their efforts not to offend minority groups to a deliberate agenda to indoctrinate people into multiculturalism and globalism. For example, regarding the former, Beatrice explained disapprovingly, 'They've got to have a representation of uh, of LGBT and all the rest of it, you know' (interview 1). Meanwhile, Eileen said of the same diverse representations on television, 'The mainstream media's trying to keep you calm and make you think multiculturalism is working (...) They're trying to condition you for the future' (interview 2). The media was just another part of a global system which was against 'us'; it worked to hide the truth regarding 'our' victimisation by not covering issues like 'genocide' of 'white farmers in Africa' (Lawrence, interview 1), because exposing these was incompatible with the left-wing agenda.

Another important aspect of this claimed mainstream media bias was its favourable treatment of Islam and Muslims. As Eileen put it 'if you attack Islam head on, in any

way shape or form, you will lose, because they are protected. The whole society is around must not upset [Muslims]' (interview 1). The ill-famed 'cover-up' of the 'Asian' or 'Pakistani grooming gangs' was used by many participants to illustrate this. Multiple participants also made reference to an incident 'barely' covered by the news media where one Muslim man allegedly beheaded another in a betting shop in the Midlands. As Olivia remarked, 'it had one paragraph in the newspaper. And I just thought that is disgusting! It's happening here all the time, and the general public don't know' (interview 1).

Portrayals of US President Donald Trump and 'Tommy Robinson' were repeatedly used to exemplify bias in the media as a whole. These individuals were presented in participants' narratives as heroes and victims, constantly attacked unfairly and portrayed dishonestly because they nobly refused to toe the line of political correctness in their pursuit of justice. As Neil attested regarding Trump, 'he's doing an amazing job which is not being published (...) whether you like Trump or not is irrelevant. The whole of the mainstream media in America is a get-Trump syndrome' (interview 1). Regarding 'Tommy Robinson', Kirk spoke of the media's culpability in turning him into a pariah by disingenuously cutting interview content to make him 'look like a (...) right-wing sort of monster' (interview 1).

Some follow-up interviews with participants took place not long after 'Tommy Robinson' had released his exposé video *Panodrama*, aimed at uncovering an alleged BBC *Panorama* programme plot to maliciously defame him. Olivia had watched the video at its 'premiere' outside the BBC offices in Salford, and told me that although the content was shocking, she was not surprised by the accusations as they confirmed her existing suspicions about the BBC's agenda. She pointed to footage in the film that showed BBC journalist John Sweeney making racist and homophobic remarks¹⁶, and said, 'all of the lies that went on. And the thing that really irritated me the most was the way the BBC deliberately make fake news' (interview 2)¹⁷. But, importantly, the film further served to confirm the notion of 'left-wing' media bias through its own lack of

¹⁶ Alongside allegations of the victimisation of 'Robinson', one of the main messages of the film was that it is the 'left', not 'us', who are intolerant (racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.), simultaneously rendering 'them' hypocrites and 'us' virtuous. This logic is similar to that used by anti-Islam(ist) groups who accuse those of defending Islam (from Islamophobia) as complicit with the subjugation of women and homophobia (see 2.4.3).

¹⁷ In the film, Sweeney is filmed attempting to coerce a source into defaming 'Tommy Robinson' and uncritically accepting evidence that the source fabricated.

coverage in the media. As Mark lamented, ‘there’s been no mention of this John Sweeney [in the media] and, it should be a big scandal what he’s tried to do’ (interview 2).

Occasionally, individuals like ‘Robinson’ were even compared with emancipatory historical figures, implying history would judge them (and those who they represent – ‘us’) as heroes in due course:

Look at Gandhi, (...) and um Nelson Mandela. They were criminals before they became heroes. Because people didn't agree. They tried to stop them from saying what they were saying, but then when the movements realised these people are telling the truth, that's when people start to wake up. (Jessica, interview 1)

In this way ‘free speech’ agendas by the right are cast as virtuous and the completeness of the ‘brainwashing’ agenda of the ‘left’ is exposed through accusations that it has inverted right and wrong in an epic injustice.

Leaders of right-wing parties such as Gerard Batten (UKIP) and Anne Marie Waters (For Britain Party) were also said to be treated unfairly by the media, who either refused to give them airtime or constantly sought to soil their names. Not only was this misleading and brainwashing the public against Brexit and other conservative causes, but the mainstream media, like politicians, were doing an injustice to democracy by not adequately representing what was deemed the views of ‘the people’.

Some participants alluded to more sinister motives, claiming ‘they don't want the people educated’ (Neil, interview 2) or the truth to come out. The existence of ‘D Notices’¹⁸ served to give tangible form to the idea of deliberate government-imposed censorship. For some (more radical) participants these represented evidence of a more sinister international plan, linked to alleged CIA programme ‘Operation Mockingbird’, in which the CIA ‘put journalists in place that (...) followed the narrative that they wanted to be seen by the public’ (Jessica, interview 1). Suspicion of the British and other

¹⁸ Several participants said they had come to learn about D-notices through social media. Officially called Defense and Security Media Advisory (DSMA) notices (Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee, 2020), these are understood to be a measure that the UK government uses to forbid the media from publishing news on a certain topic for reasons of national security.

Western media also sometimes extended to doubts over their portrayal of certain international security issues, such as the ongoing conflict in Syria and the Novichok poisoning incident in Salisbury, neither perhaps unrelated to President Trump's vocal challenging of negative portrayals of Russia's international role. Conspiratorial narratives of the March 2019 Christchurch Massacre were also present, claiming it had been fabricated by New World Order globalist actors in order to further Muslim victimhood and engender unrest. This theory, although mentioned by a very small number of participants, was demonstrative of the way in which narratives around 'mainstream media' bias and brainwashing can aid the justification of pro-Leave stances by enabling the dismissal of inconvenient information and counter-arguments as propaganda.

5.5.4 'We're not allowed to have an opinion now': The assault on free speech

Related to narratives around 'left-wing' agendas and brainwashing was a narrative that 'we' ourselves were being prevented from speaking, whether it be opinions, criticisms or other dissenting points of view. In these narratives, pushes for politically correct or sensitive language, as well as practices of no-platforming that sought to counter the normalisation of problematic and discriminatory discourses, were interpreted as the behaviour of a generation of 'snowflakes' who were intent on 'getting offended' at everything and would not listen to the opinions of others. Thus, as these practices and sensitivities were fast becoming a societal norm, not only 'freedom of speech' but healthy political debate was being stifled by the left. As Fred expressed,

One time, you know, you could criticise anybody and they accept it because it's your opinion. Doesn't have to be right but, you know, you respect the fact that somebody has an opinion. But that has been taken away from us. We're not allowed to have an opinion now. (Fred, interview 1)

The idea was that the right to 'free speech' had been or was being *taken away* from us – it was something that we had in the past, but society had been (deliberately) changed for the worse. As Kirk put it, 'it's not a free country *anymore*', (interview 2, emphasis added). In fact, the final sentence in Fred's quote also suggests that it is not only what we say but how we *think* that is being controlled. He also commented that 'political

correctness should never have been introduced into this country (...) its intention was (...) to control the minds of people' (interview 1). Thus, as with the other narratives examined throughout this chapter, such developments were not happening by accident; there was an element of overarching control underlying them.

In this narrative, the number of things that 'we' were no longer permitted to say was constantly growing to the point of absurdity. As Isaac, a self-described 'ex-squaddie' from Northwest England remarked, 'they seem to be cutting it down more and more, by limiting what we can talk about in open debate, right?' (interview 2). Nowadays, one constantly had to be careful to use the correct terms so as not to offend, a situation which went against the principles of common sense because 'where do you draw the line?' (Neil, interview 1). The changed status of deeply racially prejudiced terms to describe black and Asian people were also used by participants as examples of how the forbidding of offensive terms could become unreasonably restrictive.

Most importantly, in this narrative it was no longer possible to speak critically about immigration, Islam, or individuals of black or minority ethnic origin (or openly support leaving the EU) without being accused of racism and bigotry. This was despite the fact that such concerns were assumed by participants to be reasonable as well as widely shared. As Eileen attested, 'There's going to be pockets [of multicultural society] that aren't going to work nicely, and you should be able to discuss it' (interview 2). This restriction was also deemed overly authoritative and bad for the health of society. As Deborah argued, 'one of the most dangerous things is to gag people (...) in my view it causes far more problems in trying to suppress it' (interview 1).

Restrictions on criticism were deemed particularly stringent and harmful with regards to Islam. In addition to implying that conversations around the desirability of the increased visibility of Islam in public life were crucial and a right which native Brits were owed, the inability to criticise religious practices was portrayed as aiding and abetting crimes such as gang grooming, and the oppression of women. Eileen spoke of her frustration at the 'left-wing' and media reaction to Boris Johnson's public criticisms of Islamic veiling:

... a woman who is actually suffering health wise, completely covered in black to go out, nobody will convince me that that's acceptable (...) and I

should be allowed to say that, without being thought of as being racist (...)
I think it's common sense (...) And if that is deemed racist then there's
something wrong with society. We should be able to discuss these issues
openly. (Eileen, interview 2)

Such narratives are not new, but can be understood in part as the legacy of a long-running anti-multiculturalist discourse which has accused left-wing social agendas of supporting 'reprehensible' Islamic cultural practices around gender and denying social problems related to immigration (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010, pp. 9–10). As Kundnani (2012b, p. 156) notes, these multiculturalist principles of political correctness came to be understood as 'destroying liberal ideas of the open society', and participants' narratives demonstrate the enduring nature of these criticisms of multiculturalism long after its figurative 'death' (Kundnani, 2002).

Participants also claimed that 'patriotism' – expression of English nationalism in particular (in line with research outlined in 2.4.3) – was being censored, a narrative that has been rehearsed in populist tabloid media and anti-multiculturalist vernacular for decades (Kundnani, 2000, p. 14, 2001, p. 56; Rhodes, 2010). For example, Mark Shared a Post on Facebook expressing outrage over a veteran who had been asked by the local council to take down St George's and Union Jack flags from his front lawn (see Figure 8). When I asked Mark about this Post he said, 'Councils have been like that in this country for bloody 30, 40 years now, (...) and everybody knows it's stupidity' (interview 2). As Deborah told me, 'Nationalism has become a dirty word (...) What's wrong with national pride? It's like suddenly everything's been turned on its head!' (interview 2). Here Deborah's phrasing again alluded to the temporal dimension of this nostalgic narrative, where a world which once made sense had now 'gone mad'.

Figure 8: Post Shared by Mark from a Facebook Page called ‘I Am Proud To Be British’



While Facebook (along with other social media platforms) was the place where participants could finally express the sentiments that were being silenced offline, even this sphere was now being polluted by ‘left-wing’ bias and censorship. As Olivia stated, ‘any bit of freedom of speech on Facebook is being removed. No freedom of speech on Facebook whatsoever. And on Twitter they too have very much a left-wing leaning’ (interview 2). Participants spoke of temporary (and in one case a permanent) bans or ‘shadow bans’ they and others in their milieu had experienced after having Posted something that went against Facebook’s ‘left-wing’ ideology. For instance, Lawrence told me that one of the bans he received was for ‘stating the wrong thing regarding Islam’:

I referred to um, the Mayor of London in Britain, as being a goat shagger. [chuckles] (...) Nowadays you can say anything and somebody’s going to get ‘offended’ (...) It’s control of anybody who has a point of view (...)

clamping down of anybody with a right-wing point of view. (Lawrence, interview 1)

Social media platforms were accused of double standards in terms of which Posts they allowed; as Olivia told me ‘if you’re of a left-wing leaning, they seem to allow it through’ (interview 1). This was not only a ‘left-wing’ bias but also an undue leniency towards Muslims and other ethnic minorities. Fred evidenced this with an anecdote he had heard whereby a user had created an alias on Facebook with ‘an Indian sounding [user]name’ and when Posting the same ‘anti-Muslim’ content under both accounts, only the ‘English name’ incurred a ban (interview 1).

This bias was either attributed to the ‘left-wing leaning’ of Facebook and those with power in its organisation (sometimes referencing former Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg’s appointment there as evidence of this) or social media was said to be being manipulated for the ‘left-wing’ agenda of others. Beatrice described Facebook as ‘now actually coming in on this act’ and being ‘used as a tool to undermine democracy’ (interview 1). In her initial interview, Eileen told me of her experience of alleged ‘shadow banning’ in which a Post she Shared about German policy towards ‘migrants’ was not fully blocked but was not visible to her Followers. In her eyes, this was the result of German Chancellor Angela Merkel having ‘allegedly done some sort of agreement with Mark Zuckerberg that, no negative news about the migrant crisis’ and was part of the deliberate ‘attempt to stifle free speech’ (interview 1).

Many participants also used terms like ‘shut down’, ‘silence’, ‘gag’, or ‘suppress’ to paint a more sinister picture of surveillance and censorship. Direct comparisons were made to George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*, demonstrating the way in which narratives about the assault on free speech served as part of the metanarrative of authoritarian control and imposed social change. In particular, Facebook and interview content described ‘Tommy Robinson’ as a ‘political prisoner’, and used his recent incarceration (May to August 2018 for contempt of court) as evidence of a corrupt police state that sought to silence ‘truth tellers’. This silencing of public figures exemplified the silencing of everyday people, designed to keep the truth from getting out as well as to maintain control by punishing dissent. Regarding ‘Tommy Robinson’, Audrey lamented, ‘he’s still entitled to his speech. This is meant to be a free country,

but it's becoming a bit like lock-down. If you say something they don't like, (...) you pay the price' (interview 2).

However, these narratives about the right to offend or to absolute freedom of expression were not necessarily coherent. When I asked participants how censorship should be handled on social media, many struggled to articulate where the line should be drawn. Having spoken of free speech as harmless expression or healthy debate, when questioned they qualified these statements. For instance, Helen stated, 'I don't think they should stop anything. Unless it incites violence' (interview 1), while Deborah reflected, 'I think any criticism of any kind should be allowed, if it's well constructed, well thought-out, and not just particularly intended to insult' (interview 1). Kirk, who had received a temporary ban for making Comments on a video of a woman in a full veil failing to reverse parallel park a vehicle – admitting he 'did do quite a hatchet job on her', (interview 2) before Posting 'an aggressive message' (interview 1) in reply to someone who had accused him of racism – decided that 'yeah, I mean you can't say, you can't say exactly what you wanna say. I mean you've got to be a bit respectful' (interview 1). Overall, the way in which participants' ideas about civility were reconciled with the favoured narrative of free speech and revoked rights was by coming to the conclusion that there should be some restrictions, but not the ones we have now: 'Yes, you've gotta have a line, but not to the extent that political correctness has been, it's taken away, it's eroded our own freedoms' (Fred, interview 1). This incoherency of course reflects the difficulty that drawing such a line poses for parties on all sides of the debate. However, the hard-line libertarian stances that participants took until pushed, were reflective of a lack of acknowledgement of this nuance or difficulty.

Importantly, assaults on free speech, perceived media bias, the 'left-wing' agenda, and Britain's membership in the EU were all linked in participants' narratives. As Beatrice exclaimed, displaying exasperation, 'because, I mean [sighs] from the freedom of speech, you know, it's just, everything! Everything, it is, it's geared against us' (interview 2). The category of 'left-wing' often extended to and blended with the 'mainstream media', and the BBC in particular was seen to be a propaganda tool of the left-wing and of government. Brainwashing through constant exposure to a biased mainstream media was fuelling an ideology of 'political correctness', which was taking

away our right to free speech, and social media platforms like Facebook had now become a part of this agenda.

In summary, the ‘left-wing’ agenda against ‘us’ represented feminism and LGBT agendas, as well as positive discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. Transgender activism was viewed with particular suspicion and narratives sometimes linked this to a perceived attempt to eliminate gender distinctions entirely, or even to normalise paedophilia. The link between paedophilia and the ‘left-wing’ rested on narratives blaming things like the ‘grooming gangs’ scandal on a ‘left-wing’ reluctance to condemn such practices for fear of ‘offending’ the Muslim community or being accused of racism. However, in participants’ narratives, the left’s agenda was not simply to appease Muslims, but to malevolently impose a relativism of moral values that seemed the natural extension of tolerance towards minority sexual and gender identities. The victims were a broad category of ‘the majority’ who, it was assumed, widely shared legitimate concerns about immigration, diversity and moral relativism that they were not allowed to voice, reflecting the endurance of decades-old anti-multiculturalist tropes (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010).

5.6 ‘This is a war’: Brexit as battle, social media as battleground

With all of these things ‘geared against’ them, some of the most permeating types of narratives employed by participants pitted them against these forces in a legendary conflict. Participants envisaged themselves as understanding and speaking for the majority in saying that ‘people’, ‘everybody’, or vast quantities of Britons were ‘pissed off’ (Carl, interview 2), ‘angry’ (Beatrice, interview 2; Mark interview 1; Deborah, interview 2; Eileen interview 2), ‘fed up’ (Mark, interview 1; Beatrice, interview 2), or had ‘had enough’ (Beatrice, interview 2), whether this was due to attempts to derail Brexit, concerns about immigration and diversity long being ignored, or political correctness gone too far. Alternatively, in Eileen’s terms, ‘People are rejecting globalism’ (interview 1). Furthermore, like many of the issues referred to by participants, this impending revolt was seen not as unique to Britain but as a global phenomenon.

According to a well-rehearsed narrative, this rising discontent would not go away, but rather was reaching a crescendo that promised dire consequences very soon. If these

issues were not addressed, ‘things could erupt in this country’ (Deborah, interview 1) or there would be ‘a lot of trouble’ (Audrey, interview 1). ‘Everybody’s pulling in different directions’ (Deborah, interview 2), and a ‘culture of suppression’ was bound to cause ‘a rebellion’ (Eileen, interview 2), riots (Deborah, interview 2) or ‘a big overthrow’ (Carl, interview 2).

Gilets jaunes (‘yellow vest’) protests in France and beyond were employed to symbolise the consequences of this kind of sentiment being allowed to boil over and to demonstrate where the UK was headed. As Lawrence put it, ‘It’s all I can see happening here if we don’t get out’ (interview 2). This was particularly resonant as French President Emmanuel Macron was understood as one of Europe’s foremost symbols of ‘globalism’ and pro-EU politics.

Neil linked the chaos of the *gilets jaunes* to a global awakening in which people would not abide their suppression any longer: ‘They’re standing up and saying “no. No, no, no, no. We’re not having this anymore.” And that will spread, it’s already spreading (...) that is the awakening’ (interview 2). In this awakening, the game was up for those working against us, as people were armed with game-changing social media platforms with which to inform themselves. Jessica and Neil, who within the cohort were proponents of more radical and conspiratorial narratives, shared this narrative of an awakening in which social media had ‘completely changed the face of political information [and] information structure’ (Neil, interview 1). ‘Everybody is waking up now’ (Jessica, interview 1) to what was being done ‘outside our knowledge and without our permission’ (Neil, interview 1).

In addition to this shift in people’s knowledge and sentiments, these new forms of accountability promised ‘big change’ (Helen, interview 2) in that ‘politicians can’t hide anymore’ (Neil, interview 1), and they were imagined as either feeling the pressure of this or of not yet having ‘cottoned on to the fact that there are thousands and thousands of bloggers and millions and millions of people who are being better informed than they’ve ever been’ (Eileen, interview 2). This new change brought a mixture of optimism and pessimism, as Mark expressed: ‘We’re tired. People have changed. I’ve never seen people so et [sic] up about politicians, (...) so angry. And I just hope it comes to some good’ (interview 2). Eileen reinforced the metanarrative of sinister aims being played out behind closed doors by outlining her vision of a happy ending: ‘the

politicians just need to know that they should sit round the table, say “look, we’re not gonna get away with this anymore” (interview 2).

This narrative of a significant turning point was a fundamental element of the drama of the metanarrative. However, even more fundamental was the context within which this turning point was depicted: a critical battle. Terms like ‘fight’ were used by participants very frequently to describe the struggle in which they were engaged, and Facebook content they Shared used militaristic imagery, flags, and terms like ‘fight’ to portray the situation as a ‘war’ (see Figure 9). The opponent in the battle was always one or more of the ‘villains’ described above or, more abstractly, the value changes which threatened society. References were also at times made to World War II, not only as a symbol of lost patriotism and glory or as a reminder of the potential sinister nature of Germany (see Figure 10), but to draw parallels that emphasised the critical nature of our current historic moment. Deborah made this link most directly at the end of our follow-up interview when she lamented, ‘That is how we won the war. Because we were all on the same side, which we no longer are. And this in a way is a war’ (interview 2).

Figure 9: Image Shared by Mark from a Facebook Page called ‘Moggmania’¹⁹



¹⁹ A fan Group for Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Figure 10: Image Shared by Lawrence from a Facebook Page called 'Brexit Now.'²⁰



As noted in 4.4, not all participants agreed with their online engagements being described as a 'community', and participation in offline political action was limited. Nevertheless, several described a sense of being personally engaged in or having a stake in this 'fight' or 'battle'. Beatrice spoke of the inevitability of facing conflict through her Facebook activity (see 4.5.2), but insisted she would not give up without a fight: 'if you put your head above the parapet you have to expect to be shot at, (...) if they want to shoot at me they can shoot at me, I don't have a problem with that, but they will have to fight me' (interview 1). This battle in which participants were engaged was also set within a global context; as Jessica commented she wanted people to understand 'the deeper meaning of why we're trying to save our countries' (interview 1).

In much of the narrative, democracy was the focal point of this battle. Democracy itself was depicted as under threat, in crisis, having been corrupted, or in need of 'saving'. While the 'undemocratic' nature of the EU was at the heart of this threat for some (as mentioned in 5.3.2), narratives around the threat to democracy primarily centred around the UK's exit from the EU being 'undermined' by calls for a second referendum from Remainers, and by delays caused by the inability of parliament and then Prime Minister Theresa May to conclude (or walk away from) negotiations with the EU. For Mark and Lawrence, the enemy in this battle was 'anybody that's giving up democracy and things

²⁰ This was Posted alongside a quote attributed to the 'Reich Commander to the Netherlands 1940' espousing a one-nation Europe participating in a 'great common destiny'.

like that or, like I said, sovereignty’ (Mark, interview 2) or ‘going against the will of the people’ (Lawrence, interview 2). Participants repeatedly expressed frustration at this perceived injustice, but this was also accompanied by a sense of foreboding. Eileen captured this emphatically:

If this [the derailing of Brexit] happens, you’re witnessing the breakdown of democracy. That is a tragic state of events. Because the future without democracy is grim, because there’s only autocracy, which is a dictatorial rule, which is what I feel the EU is (...) So, this isn’t about Brexit anymore really. It’s about the breakdown of democracy and the fight is about upholding democracy, because without it we’re sunk. (Eileen, interview 2)

This preoccupation with democracy was perhaps not surprising given the focus in the metanarrative on the victimisation of an imagined collective ‘common people’, in a battle against powerful political actors. As De Genova (2018a, pp. 359–361) borrowing from the work of Laclau (2005) asserts, ‘That elementary grammar that unites the entire discursive field of bourgeois democracy as such (...) is populism (...) “The People” is thus enshrined with a certain unquestionable halo of integrity as an essential premise of all democratic politics’. In this sense, the characterisation of the EU as an undemocratic organisation, as impeding Britain’s sovereign democracy through the imposition of EU law, and the ‘failure’ of elected MPs to implement the ‘will of the people’ by approving an adequate Withdrawal Bill by the promised deadline, share a preoccupation with ‘democracy’ that is not coincidental. Moralistic discourses about democratic values are consistently and strategically employed in populist rhetoric to invoke ‘the people’ that populism purports to defend (see 2.4.2), and the issue of Britain’s membership in the EU has proven a fertile ground for the cultivation of this. The universally assumed value of democracy in the Western democratic context meant that framing the metanarrative struggle as a fight for democracy also served to normalise participants’ views and demands while negating and delegitimising criticisms and counterarguments by condemning them as ‘undemocratic’.

Losing the battle for Britain or for democracy represented the negative potential outcome of the climax of the metanarrative, and for some this was when the real conflict would begin. Lawrence used the term ‘civil war’ to describe his apocalyptic premonition for a future of ‘bedlam’ ‘if we don’t get Brexit’, and emphasised the

dramatic nature of this by comparing it to one of his favourite films, *V for Vendetta* (interview 2). More suspicious narratives questioned whether this outcome was all part of the plan; as Olivia said of the Christchurch massacre, which she believed was staged or a ‘false flag’, ‘[it] does make me wonder if (...) they’re trying to deliberately start up some sort of a civil war’ (interview 2). This climax was also viewed as an historic moment, with participants speaking of the legacy that they wanted to leave their children or grandchildren.

Alongside the narrative that Britain would be economically better off without the EU (see 5.3.1) existed a contrasting narrative that leaving, and in particular leaving with no deal, would likely bring hardship, but that this hardship was necessary, temporary, and sometimes even welcome for its potential ability to bring people together. Britain would ‘bounce back’ from a no-deal Brexit and the disruption it would cause mattered little compared with the freedom from the EU that would be achieved in this scenario. Mark’s comments summarise the assumed collective willingness to accept hardship expressed by a number of participants:

I haven’t spoken to any person that wants to leave that’s not willing to take a little bit of a hit at first (...) Yeah we might struggle a bit for the first couple of years, but so what? We’re willing to do that. Crikey we’ve overcome more adversity than this before as a country. (Mark, interview 2)

This struggle was romanticised, and analogies were drawn with post-war economic difficulty and rationing, as evidenced in Deborah’s comment above. This narrative was resonant of nostalgic ‘Empire 2.0’ visions identified in the referendum campaign (see 2.4).

These narratives of Brexit as a battle and social media as its battleground demonstrate the way in which the narratives participants drew on to account for their positions and their online engagement around Brexit were not simply a story of victimhood or of unwanted ‘left-wing’ social change. They were also a story of opportunity – an opportunity to turn the tide which constituted a call to action. The avenues to agency provided by their online political engagement, as discussed in Chapter 4, were important to participants because they afforded them the ability to fight. The vision for

victory may have been at times vague, and what was at stake was constructed mostly through ominous and symbolic references to cultural destruction. But what was clear to participants was that they were participating in a critical moment in British and global history.

5.7 Conclusion

During interviews, although my questions focused on participants' social media use and its relation to their political engagement, participants invariably preferred to talk about Brexit and the other political issues with which they were engaged. Within these conversations, they drew on strikingly similar narratives to each other, narratives which were used to account for their position on these issues. In examining these, four broad narratives emerged: *The EU is corrupt, undemocratic, and power-hungry*; *Immigration, diversity and Islam are a problem*; *Leftist politics are ruining and brainwashing society*; and, *Brexit is a battle being fought on social media*.

These narratives cohered around a metanarrative of an agenda against 'us'. Within this metanarrative, we can identify victims, villains, and heroes, as well as a plot between good and evil, a crisis, and an ever-shifting point of climax at which the destiny of Britain – and indeed the world – would be determined. Crucial within this was the notion of power and control, and while this meant the metanarrative shared characteristics with conspiracy theories, such as a Manichean view of power (B. Lee, 2020), participants were rarely conspiracy-oriented media consumers. They drew selectively on a variety of related narratives. Each had their own foci and interests, and related and reinterpreted narratives based on a combination of their own experiences and the media they consumed. This is consistent with psycho-social understandings of narratives; individuals create their own narratives by drawing on 'narrative templates' and cultural codes offered by society and harmonise these with their own personal experiences (Bruner, 2004, p. 694; Stapleton & Wilson, 2017).

The way in which participants constantly constructed links, both explicit and implicit, between things like gender rights and multiculturalism; political correctness and 'open borders'; Islamisation and 'cultural Marxism'; or European integration and media bias, demonstrates how the metanarrative thread was woven through all of their political concerns. That participants saw all of these as connected, as all part of the same story,

did not necessarily mean they saw them as a conspiracy. Rather this reflected perceived social change coinciding with a broad sense of disempowerment, together interpreted as meaning that the power to change society was increasingly held by those on the 'left'.

Much of the content of the narratives rested on nativist, culturally racist, and in particular Islamophobic, ideology. The focus on power in the metanarrative often rendered villains the political and media actors who accommodated or promoted multiculturalism and diversity. However, the ethnic, cultural or religious minorities themselves were also demonised and in many instances dehumanised by these narratives in ways that assumed racialised and nativist conceptualisations of national belonging, as well as assuming Islam and Muslims to be dangerous and polluting influences.

These narratives were about much more than Britain's membership in the EU. They conceptualised this membership as a product and producer of – that is, complexly interconnected with – a variety of negative social changes. In this sense, a conservative discourse of decline can be identified as a clear thread in the metanarrative and the narratives that comprise it. Nostalgia, like that described by Campanella and Dassù (2019a), clearly played an integral role here, but was not novel. As Paul Gilroy (1987, p. 46) has highlighted, a discourse of the nation in crisis has been a crucial part of Britain's national story since the 1960s. This is intimately tied to post-war immigration and a state of postcolonial melancholia, within which, '[t]he process of national decline is presented as coinciding with the dilution of once homogeneous and continuous national stock by alien strains'. However, in this metanarrative, decline was not only related to cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, but to the 'left-wing' social change surrounding and supporting this – characterised by far-right conspiracy theories of 'cultural Marxism' – which was normalising deviance and engendering moral relativism. Society was being brainwashed by malevolent 'lefties' and 'Remainers' who wished to erase individual and gender difference in what participants saw as a communist vision of social engineering. The link between anxieties over the 'permissive society' and anti-immigration politics is not new, with Smith (1994, p. 130) having identified Enoch Powell's political discourse in the 1960s and 70s as providing such anxieties, along with frustration and disillusionment with the political system, 'their official voice' (see also Gilroy, 1987). Just as with the post-war crisis-of-Britain

discourse, the current metanarrative worked to create a sense of moral panic (Hall et al., 1978).

Elchardus and Spruyt (2016) argue that ‘declinism’ – ‘a very negative view of the evolution of society’ – along with identification with a group understood as unfairly treated by society, are key precursors to populism. In fact, the metanarrative shared many elements with populist discourse. It invoked fear by focusing on a threat to ‘us’ (Wodak et al., 2013, p. 2). Elite groups were often the source of this threat in the metanarrative, and the victims in the story were constituted by a nebulous category of ‘us’ – a homogenous majority whose demands were being excluded from the process of decision-making around social change. Both populism and conspiracy theories are based on an ‘absolutist orientation to power and democracy’ – a framework of good vs evil (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Each ‘simplifies complex developments by looking for a culprit’ (Pelinka, 2013, p. 8), thus providing a degree of ontological security (Kinnvall, 2015; Nefes, 2013 in Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 362). The metanarrative, like conspiracy theories and populism, was a way of organising and affording certainty to what was seen to be disorder and insecurity, both personal and collective. Its appeal rested on its function as a way of making sense of a world which participants felt had ‘gone mad’.

Participants in this study had the opportunity to do a great deal of sense-making thanks to their online political engagement, and this was evident in their ability to reproduce this array of narratives so articulately in our interviews. Arguably, their Facebook milieus provided them a vast, ready-made bank of narrative material or templates with which to interpret their experiences and account for their positions. This practice of accounting for their political position was also seemingly particularly important to participants given their experiences of constantly being labelled irrational, uneducated or ‘racist’ for choosing to support Leave; their challenges to this characterisation are discussed further in Chapter 6. As discussed in Chapter 4, the logic of Facebook and social media more broadly made participants’ engagement possible, in turn facilitating the production and reproduction of the metanarrative within their milieu. Arguably, it would not have been possible for this bank of narratives or the ‘vocabularies of motive’ (Mills, 1940) they employed to arise without this.

As Mills (*ibid*, p. 913) argues, the vocabularies of motive which circulate within society ‘are of no value apart from the delimited societal situations for which they are the

appropriate vocabularies. They must be situated'. In this sense, if social media provided the methodological opportunity for the dissemination of the metanarrative, Brexit provided the ideological opportunity. The issue of Britain's membership in the EU, popularised as it was by UKIP's adoption of immigration as its central campaign issue (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, pp. 76–89), crystallised a variety of long-standing concerns around immigration and the accommodation of diversity. The intimate connections between the metanarrative and far-right conspiracy theories prompt us to ask the question of where the plot of this metanarrative originates and to whose benefit. It indicates the possibility that more extreme right actors deliberately capitalised on the unique combination of these methodological and ideological opportunities to disseminate their ideology to a new audience who, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, had not necessarily been actively engaged with such issues previously.

The way in which participants employed this metanarrative which centred on the orchestration of their victimhood from above can be understood as a product of their feeling of being out of control of their own destiny, and an expression of will to agency. It provided them with a (comparatively low-cost and low-risk) opportunity or even an imperative to take back control by using social media to take action, in the form of sharing knowledge. This knowledge and its meaning to participants is explored in the next and final empirical chapter.

6. A battle between hearts and minds? Taking back control of knowledge

6.1 Introduction

As discussed in 2.3.3, as social media has increasingly assumed the role of news and information provider (Kaspar & Müller-Jensen, 2019), and confidence in traditional news media and other epistemic authorities like politicians continues to decline (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017, p. 704; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019, p. 1221), one way in which this ‘trust crisis’ and the resulting political divisions have been conceptualised is through the notion of ‘post-truth’ (Cosentino, 2020, p. 14; see also d’Ancona, 2017; Guarda et al., 2018; Hannan, 2018; Harsin, 2018; Kakutani, 2018; Kalpokas, 2019; Lakoff, 2017; McComiskey, 2017; Overell & Nicholls, 2019b). This refers to the privileging of emotion over reason, or personal beliefs over ‘objective’ facts (Flood, 2016). As was established in 2.4.1, this is precisely the way the EU referendum has been depicted: ‘as a battle between “heads” and “hearts”, reason [Remain] and emotion [Leave]’ (Moss et al., 2020, p. 837), As Carl et al. (2019, p. 90) note, ‘there has been considerable debate about whether voters (particularly Leave voters) were well informed prior to making their decision’.

However, as the criticisms addressed in 2.3.3 make clear, the relationship between emotions and rational thought in politics is not necessarily a mutually exclusive one. Furthermore, it is unlikely that Leavers have a monopoly on emotional political decision-making. The characterisation of support for Leave (and for Trump in the US) as the result of a novel political emotionality is clearly laden with value judgement and thus should be treated with a degree of scepticism. In fact, Carl et al. (2019, p. 90) found no overall difference in knowledge between Leavers and Remainers in their study, with both groups having a tendency to hold correct knowledge where this was ‘ideologically convenient’ for them. As Laybats and Tredinnick (2016, p. 204) point out, ‘this is not the first time in which the value of truth has been put under question’. The philosopher whose work is often drawn upon by recent ‘post-truth’ theorists, Jean Baudrillard, actually heralded the ‘destruction’ of meaning almost 40 years ago (Baudrillard, 1981). Furthermore, as this thesis has demonstrated, simplistic explanations that fail to take into account socio-political context and the active political agency of individuals do little to contribute to our understanding of support for Brexit and its surrounding politics.

Building on these critiques, this chapter examines the ways in which participants spoke about knowledge (broadly construed as encompassing notions of ‘truth’, ‘information’, ‘facts’ etc.) to determine the role that this played in their political engagement with Brexit and related issues, and respond to Research Question 4. In doing so, it challenges the ‘post-truth’ notion that Brexit and its related right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist movements online are part of a new era in which emotions are valued over rationality or facts. Evidence from the study demonstrates that knowledge was in fact highly valued by participants and was central to the way in which they spoke about politics as they sought to subvert what they saw as the dominant regime of truth and redefine where the power to determine the truth lay. This engagement with truth and facts was, however, a highly affective experience, and emotions like anger, pride and amusement played a significant role.

The chapter begins by considering the value that participants attributed to knowledge in relation to their political engagement online, arguing that it was not dismissed in favour of emotions but in fact regarded as a crucial resource. Participants constructed themselves as knowledge-rich, objective fact-seekers, in response to a sense of being characterised by their political opponents and hegemonic political discourse as emotional and irrational. In the second section of the chapter, I further demonstrate this oppositional construction by turning to the contested nature of knowledge in participants’ narratives, and the way in which they staked their claim to knowledge by characterising it as something hidden by authorities and ignored by their irrational political opponents – namely Remainers and ‘lefties’. This leads me to examine participants’ notions of what constituted trustworthy information or content, in particular the complex relationship between the ‘common sense’ epistemic logic traditionally inherent in populism, and participants’ preoccupation with ‘objective’ facts. In light of this analysis, I end by discussing the role that emotions and affect played in participants’ interactions with content and claims to knowledge.

6.2 ‘Did you know *that?*’ Knowledge as a valued resource

Contrary to the assertion in ‘post-truth’ theories that facts are being usurped by a focus on emotions in mediated politics, the current study revealed that knowledge was a highly valued resource to participants. Their narratives constructed knowledge as

important not only for its own sake, but as a weapon in the epistemic struggle surrounding Brexit and the social change discussed in Chapter 5. In the face of a common characterisation of Leavers as ignorant of facts, participants constructed themselves as objective information seekers, treating knowledge as a form of cultural capital they sought to accumulate. This section demonstrates these points using evidence from both interviews and Facebook observations.

6.2.1 Knowledge as paramount

In interviews, participants spent significant time and energy talking about the facts and ‘truths’ they had discovered around the themes discussed in Chapter 5, and this reflected their avid information-seeking practices online, as outlined in Chapter 4. Some participants like Jessica, Neil, Eileen and Olivia were so preoccupied with the information they had discovered that they divulged this to me at length unprompted and almost compulsively during interviews, illustrating their intense preoccupation with uncovering and sharing the ‘truth’. The preparation for the pro-Brexit demonstration that Beatrice was undertaking at the time of our second interview (see 4.5.1) was also demonstrative: she was creating flyers filled with facts and figures that she had gathered from Facebook content, including on the proportion of pro-Brexit guests on the BBC’s Andrew Marr and Sunday Politics shows compared with anti-Brexit guests, and details about the purported threat from the ‘UN Migration Pact’.

Facts and figures came up often in the Facebook content observed also. For instance, Eileen wrote an original Post claiming that ‘1 in 5 people arrested in Britain are foreign nationals’ and that a ‘crime tourism’ suspect was ‘arrested every 3 minutes’. Similarly, Fred Shared a news article from the *Telegraph* entitled ‘Trading on World Trade Organisation terms offers the best Brexit deal’ (Bootle, 2018) accompanied by the following text, added by the Page who he had Shared it from. The text focuses heavily on facts and figures:

The remainers really need to educate themselves.

90% of world economic growth is outside the EU

82% of the world GDP is outside the EU

60% of UK exports not to EU.

Over 100 countries doing well outside the EU.

Proving the 17.4 million voting to leave were cognizant of being outside the EU, without a deal, is our best option. (Fred's Facebook Wall)

Figure 11 is a further example Posted by Helen, a screenshot of a tweet by David Davis, a Conservative MP. Davis had resigned as Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union in July 2018 over objections to then Prime Minister Theresa May's 'soft' Brexit plans, and thus was broadly considered an ally in this milieu.

Figure 11: Image Shared by Helen from another user's Facebook Page



All of these examples illustrate the centrality of employing facts and figures to evidence participants' positions. They demonstrate the way in which participants often saw facts, figures and rational argument as invaluable weapons in their battle for Brexit and related conservative causes. Olivia echoed this when she told me that the reason she chose to Share videos rather than images on Facebook was strategic: 'you can't tell a story from a picture (...) and you can't see the facts' (interview 2).

In the same vein, and as discussed in 4.3.2, for many the 'point' of social media was to discover and share knowledge. Eileen illustrated this when she criticised online personalities like Katie Hopkins, 'Tommy Robinson' and Raheem Kassam, along with more small-time 'bloggers' engaging in similar activities to herself, for having become wrapped up in 'growing' their brands, prioritising their egos and the generation of income over informing the public. She contrasted this behaviour with her own attitude towards 'blogging':

They're following you cos they want to know if you've got any information for them (...) I'm not interested in me getting my way. I'm interested in other people making a choice from an informed platform. That's the difference. (Eileen, interview 2)

As Kirk told me of social media, 'It's just education. Any education's good' (interview 2). In this sense, facts and figures were not just considered crucial evidence for participants' arguments, but the idea was that the more they could learn online about what was being hidden from them by those in power, the better they could equip themselves and others against these forces. It was for this reason that Eileen attested she was happy to admit when she had been mistaken and clarify the truth for her followers, and Jessica told me that within her truth-seeking online milieu, when a previously Shared piece of information was found to have been false, users were keen to call this out, because 'we've gotta keep on track here – only the truth has gotta come out' (interview 1). In his follow-up interview, Neil told me he always encouraged friends online to 'expand your brain. Expand your knowledge'. When I asked him whether ignorance might be preferable to discovering distressing truths about things like purported globalist plans to exterminate 90% of the Earth's population, he answered categorically in the negative: 'These people are evil (...) If you say "well I don't want to know," then don't be surprised if bad things happen. People need to know'. This comment was illustrative of the characterisation of truth and fact as strategies against the kind of oppression constructed in the metanarrative outlined in Chapter 5.

6.2.2 Knowledge as cultural capital

Knowledge was not only treated as for the common good, but often seemed to be used by participants to signal self-worth, akin to a form of cultural capital. This was not in the strictly Bourdieusian sense of a hierarchy of taste (Bourdieu, 1984), but rather a perceived contemporary hierarchy of legitimacy, in which participants felt marginalised and patronised by Remainers and those on the left who seemed to claim a higher status through their assertion of their own truthfulness. In interviews, participants constructed themselves as rational beings who actively researched and verified information and thus were more informed than most. They also engaged in performances of knowledge wealth. Carl and Jessica, for example, often asked me 'Did you know *that?*' Carl also

told me he prided himself on knowing ‘more [about Islam] than a lot of Muslims’ (interview 1).

Participants like Eileen and Olivia, who dedicated themselves to researching Brexit and Islam respectively (Olivia frequently referring to this as ‘her topic’) were particularly proud of their knowledge. Each positioning themselves as an authority on their subject matter, they described in interviews how even those with similar political views tended to be naïve, easily convinced by appealing manifestos or political promises. Eileen was able to rattle off details about Coudenhove-Kalergi (see 2.3.2) and quote almost word for word the line from a 1952 letter that she claimed demonstrated the gradual and covert orchestration of a European superstate (see 5.3.3). As she told me,

An element of my Followers will trust what I say, because I save them having to do their research. I’ve done it all first. And because of a proven track record in not letting people down, they can afford to put their trust in me (...) I’m on[line] every day doing this. (Eileen, interview 2)

Deborah demonstrated a similar view when she spoke of altercations with her son-in-law. Alluding to a frustration at being talked down to by the opposition, she told me, ‘I spend a lot of time going into these issues, and I get quite annoyed when people that have only skimmed the surface try to inform me and tell me I’m wrong’ (interview 2).

Participants’ accumulation of knowledge as a form of cultural capital resonates with Bourdieu’s figure of the ‘autodidact’ (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 328–330) in that they are ‘self-taught in an effort to raise their status’ (Brown, 1997, p. 23). ‘Estranged or excluded from legitimate modes of acquisition, autodidacts invest in alternative forms of cultural capital, those not fully recognized by the educational system and the cultural elite’ (Sconce, 1995, pp. 378–380). In this sense, participants’ practices of information-seeking for the accumulation of knowledge as cultural capital can be viewed as part of their efforts to reclaim their status within a hierarchy of legitimacy which had relegated them to a lower status vis-a-vis those with more ‘liberal’, ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘tolerant’ views. This echoes the argument of Ylä-Anttila (2018, p. 378) that the positivist use of knowledge in the contemporary online right-wing populist sphere ‘is their way of building an opposition between themselves – supposedly not only morally but epistemically right – and the “misguided” elite’ (see 2.3.3).

Such claims to knowledge wealth were also closely linked with participants' assertion that they always 'do their research', which was somewhat of a popular refrain. As touched upon in 4.3.1, participants were adamant that they did not blindly believe everything they read, but rather investigated and verified claims online, particularly before Sharing content. In contrast to others online (particularly Remainers or those on the political left, as is discussed in the next section) they assured me they 'try not to comment on something I know nothing about' (George, interview 1). Mark likewise insisted, 'I'll always research things. I don't just blindly put things on' (interview 2). Similar attitudes were expressed by some respondents in Pilkington's (2020, p. 128) recent ethnographic study with participants of far-right street movements regarding their internet use, perhaps indicating a broader trend.

These claims to 'do research' may seem contradictory given participants' own passive information seeking practices on Facebook (as discussed in Chapter 4). However, they do not necessarily represent claims to be seeking information from a range of sources in the first instance. Rather, they relate a declared practice of *verifying* the information that they encountered *on the Facebook platform*, notwithstanding the fact that narratives around practices may not always reflect reality.

This attitude of finding out for oneself and coming to one's own conclusions in an informed and rational manner was not just a self-characterisation but was often encouraged and expected of others, illustrating once more the value that participants placed on knowledge. As Carl assured me, 'anything to do with the "religion of not peace" (...) I always say, "research it yourself first"' (interview 1). Similarly, Neil stressed that when he Posts content he always reminds people 'Don't just take my word for it' (interview 1). Both Neil and Jessica also attributed their interest in Q-Anon (see 4.2) to the way its curator (known as 'Q') 'tells you to go and investigate for yourself' (Jessica, interview 1). Eileen too, although priding herself on providing her Followers with information, told me that part of her mission was 'encouraging people above all else to research stuff before they just Share the tripe that comes up on Facebook' (interview 1). Although, as Eileen's comment aptly demonstrates, this was in no small part due to the mistrust of mainstream media narratives discussed in previous chapters, and represented an ironic awareness of the problem of 'fake news' on online platforms,

it was also a clear reflection of the value participants placed on rationality and objectivity: people should base their views on proven evidence.

In summary, discourses around information, including the frequent use of facts and figures, illustrated the way in which participants saw knowledge as a valuable resource, and their construction of themselves as knowledgeable information sources who had done their research reinforced this. In this sense, narratives of valuing information and of going and researching for oneself – through the practices discussed in Chapter 4, and in the context of the disempowerment described in Chapter 5 – can be seen as appealing to participants’ desire to exercise their agency. These were a means of claiming a stake in decisions around knowledge production. Indeed, much of the question regarding why participants so valued knowledge can be answered by turning to this issue of disempowerment, which is explored further in the following section.

6.3 Knowledge as contested

As noted above, participants’ construction of themselves as the bearers of truth was in response to their characterisation as ignorant of the truth by their political opponents. Their preoccupation with knowledge was a product of a context in which they rejected the hegemonic regime of truth (Foucault, 1976/2000) around Brexit and the politics of minority rights issues – one which in their mind wrongly deemed Brexit a ‘disaster’ and ‘left-wing’ values beneficial to society. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, participants were extremely distrusting of mainstream media and authority: these were seen as hiding the truth and, along with Remainers and others on the left, working to deny participants’ rationality and legitimacy. Against this backdrop, in participants’ political engagements, the truth was in constant contest, and these engagements formed part of a battle to stake their claim in knowledge production, played out through social media.

6.3.1 ‘They don’t want you to know’: True knowledge as hidden

The first step to challenging the dominant regime of truth was to assert that the ‘real’ truth was being hidden by those in power. In participants’ narratives, knowledge needed to be sought and uncovered because the ‘truth’ was being kept from ‘us’. As discussed in previous chapters, the mainstream media in particular could not be trusted to represent participants’ views ‘because of its left-wing bias’ (Olivia, interview 2).

However, in many cases participants alluded to the belief that the mainstream media and other institutions of authority blatantly lied or hid the truth: ‘They’ve lied to us, and they’re continuing to lie to us’ (Fred, interview 2).

Alternatively, as Neil described, the BBC and other British broadcasters did not ‘put out misinformation, but what they do is omit information’ (interview 1). That is, knowledge was being deliberately hidden or covered up: ‘we don’t seem to have been told the full story’ (Fred, interview 2). Thus, when it came to issues like Brexit, migration or Islam, ‘people have no access to the information cos the mainstream media won’t share it’ (Eileen, interview 2) because ‘they don’t want you to know all this, what’s going on’ (Jessica, interview 1). This was not just the case for the media specifically but for the establishment more generally, including politicians, the government, educational institutions and the police. ‘We were being kept ignorant’ (Neil, interview 1) and thus the truth had to be sought out by individuals who had to ‘find out for themselves’ (Eileen, interview 1).

With the advent of the internet, participants could finally uncover these truths, and social media was where these discoveries took place. As Beatrice told me, social media was ‘the only way, fair way that you could actually (...) learn about stuff, find out what was really going on in the world’ (interview 2). Uncovering and figuring out the truth was often portrayed as an active process, as reflected in the above-described value placed on doing one’s own research. Of course, given growing censorship of far-right and conspiracy-related content on Facebook and other social media platforms, participants were also aware that the knowledge they sought was becoming increasingly difficult to find. As Jessica put it, ‘what they’re trying to do now is try to curb that information from being shared’ (interview 2). Eileen, who as a ‘blogger’ saw herself as a source of information for her tens of thousands of followers, alluded to this difficulty when she said, ‘I’m just telling the truth, and not many people are’ (interview 2).

There was a strong sense that this situation was unjust. Olivia expressed this well when she described the way she had explained to a policeman (who was stewarding a demonstration she attended) the significance of the ‘UN Migration Pact’ that was referred to on her home-made vest:

I thought ‘oh my gosh, shame on the mainstream media’ (...) for me to have to say to that young policeman, if you really want the truth, you need to look elsewhere for the truth, you’re not gunna get it from mainstream media... (Olivia, interview 1)

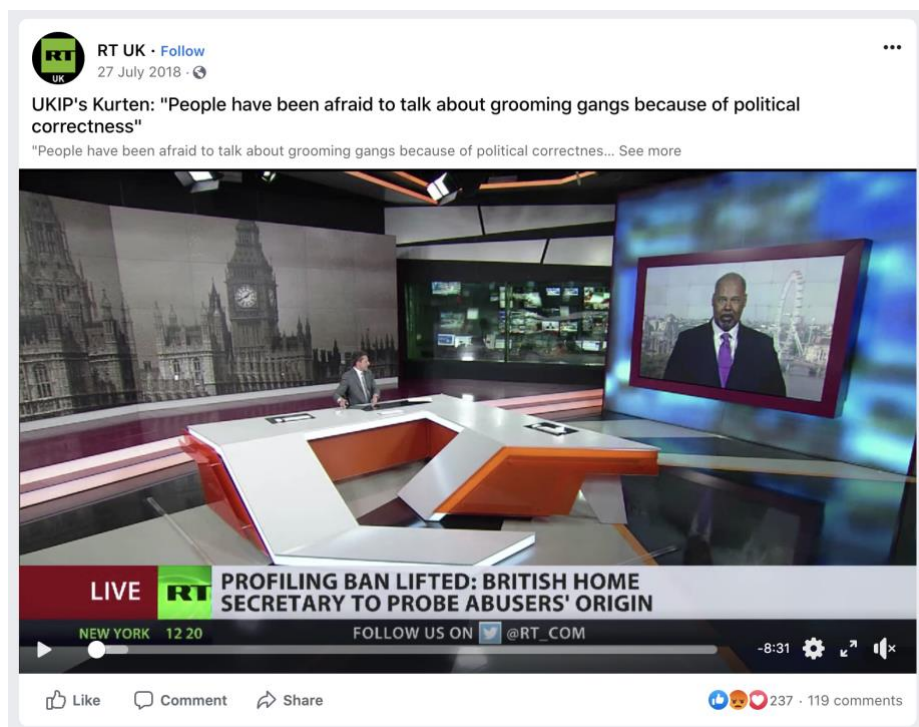
It was an affront that international agreements like this, along with the Maastricht and other EU-related treaties, had (in participants’ view) been ‘done in secret’ (Neil, interview 1) meaning ‘nobody reported or made a big deal out of it’ (Mark, interview 2) ‘cos they don’t want us to know’ (Eileen, interview 2). According to Neil, ‘it’s only come out since the internet and the social [media] that we’re finding these things out, and that’s why people are angry because we suddenly realise that we have been duped in a way’ (interview 1). As Eileen lamented, ‘this is people you should be able to trust, feeding you bullshit’ (interview 1).

As mentioned in Chapter 4, a whole industry of alternative news and information sites now exists. These sites challenge the authority of the mainstream media through criticism of its content and motives, and emphasise their own knowledge, experience, and positions of victimhood. According to Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2019), this is a strategy used by alternative news outlets to make populist appeals to their own status as members of the ‘ordinary’ citizenry. These sites cater to, and in turn propagate, this notion that the mainstream media are withholding information in order to control people’s opinions (Holt, 2019).

The issue of ‘grooming gangs’ (see 4.2) was a prominent topic in participants’ milieu. The issue was taken up in particular by campaigner ‘Tommy Robinson’, effectively marrying legitimate concerns over child welfare with his long-standing anti-Islam(ist) agenda, and shooting him to popularity within the field of ‘citizen journalists’ online. This even led to his controversial appointment by UKIP as a special advisor on the topic in 2018 (Walker, 2018). The reason this issue is salient here is that much of the attention and outcry involved accusations of a ‘politically-correct cover-up’ by the police and local authorities (Cockbain & Tufail, 2020, p. 9). The issue resonated so strongly with the right in Britain not only because of the racialised figure of the Muslim that it perpetuated and the vulnerability of the underage white ‘native’ female victims involved, but also because the narrative of such a cover-up ‘for fear of being branded racist’ (Norfolk, 2011) fits well with the refrain of ‘political correctness’ that has acted

as such a lasting and effective device for legitimising racism (Tufail, 2018). It could be argued that decades old cries of ‘political correctness’ have in fact laid the foundation for the populist and nativist right’s and the current study’s participants’ present preoccupation with the withholding of the truth by media and authorities. This relationship is also epitomised by the ‘politically incorrect’ ‘truth telling’ image of Donald Trump (Shafer, 2017) among participants and Trump’s broader support base. Figure 12 is an example of a Post on this, a video in which a UKIP politician is being interviewed about ‘grooming gangs’ and ‘political correctness’ on Russia’s international broadcaster, RT, which prides itself in covering ‘stories overlooked by the mainstream media’ (Holt et al., 2019, p. 861).

Figure 12: Video Shared by Deborah regarding ‘grooming gangs’



Of course, these accusations of high-level deliberate cover-ups, in their most extreme form, become conspiratorial. As discussed in Chapter 5, although participants were not necessarily conspiracy theorists in the sense of always subscribing to the belief that such theories provide ‘the ultimate explanation for “what is really going on”’ (Butter & Knight, 2020, p. 4), they employed narratives that drew on recently popular far-right conspiracy theories like the New World Order and the Kalergi Plan. As Barkun (1997, p. 249) puts it, taking conspiracy theories seriously means accepting that ‘no knowledge

promulgated by such institutions [of authority] can be trusted'. In fact, a conspiracy theory is not only a 'populist theory of power' (Fenster, 2008, p. 89) as identified in Chapter 5, but also a 'populist theory of knowledge... It proceeds from the assumption that "the truth is out there" – that is, secret knowledge exists, withheld by the establishment, but attainable, assuming sufficient dedication' (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 362).

For participants, actively uncovering these hidden truths was about both power *and* knowledge. It was part of challenging the authority of mainstream media and other establishment institutions to lay claim to knowledge, to determine what was true and what was false. In describing his dismay at what he felt was extremist-sympathising coverage by the BBC of the September 11 attacks, Mark told me, 'I thought, "this is not what I hear on the streets. This is not what I hear in the pubs. This is no way a reflection of any society I know"' (interview 1). His comments illustrate the sense of unjust exclusion from knowledge production that was a strong theme in participants' narratives. For Beatrice, this deception added to Leavers' humiliation:

It's the lying and the, and by inference, (...) they are insulting my intelligence (...) I know you said *that* last week, now you're standing there and saying *this* this week. And (...) you're telling me that I'm uneducated and all the rest of it, (...) and [Remainers are] trying to fight for a second referendum because "we didn't know what we were doing" (...) I'm sorry, but I knew what I was doing! (Beatrice, interview 1)

This exclusion from knowledge production and resultant discontent was the basis of the contest over knowledge that is elucidated in the following section.

6.3.2 Laying claim to truth

Beatrice's above comment alludes to the notion that challenging hegemonic truths was not only a matter of uncovering what was hidden but also required participants to assert their claims to truth and knowledge in opposition to Remainers and those on the left. As discussed in Chapter 4, conflict was a central element of participants' political engagement online. Such conflicts were part of a struggle over truth and facts that occurred around Brexit and other 'left-wing' politics. This was illustrated in the language Carl used when he told me that the reason he liked to keep an eye on 'the crap

[the mainstream media] come out with' was 'because I want to I educate meself on what they're saying, so I can *defend* meself when they're saying it' (interview 1, my emphasis).

Reflecting the divisions sown in the referendum campaign (Hobolt et al., 2020), debates about the benefits of leaving the European Union were particularly heated, and mutual understanding was often seen as futile. The argument that Lawrence had with his stepsister via Facebook which resulted in their estrangement (see 4.5.2) was an example of this. He told me,

It was about the referendum, (...) 'we must remain, to help the NHS', but it was like, but if we leave, we're saving 39 billion a year, and we can help put our NHS back where we need it and we govern our own NHS rather than the EU controlling everything. But she didn't see it that way. (Lawrence, interview 1)

Similarly, a number of Eileen's self-authored Facebook Posts were cynical responses to Private Messages she had allegedly received from 'remoaner' and 'leftie' critics. The below example of an extract from one of these Posts alludes in particular to the demeaning stereotypes that participants felt were attributed to them by those on the opposite side of politics, and particularly by young people. The Post also challenges the perceived claims to expertise of these opponents:

Thanks for the message (...) and pointing out I'm a thick northerner, if you can't even accept me, someone from your own country who has a regional accent how come you welcome migrants? You say you have a degree ! (...) We left school at 16 and became adults at 16 and three quarters (...) A gap year was usually had one week in July in Blackpool in a sea front hotel (...) Anyway I can't stay I'm just giving birth to my 14 illegitimate child, at the number 32 bus stop and I haven't got the right change I'm all fingers and thumbs and the heads out! (...) (Eileen's Facebook Wall, original text Post)

Whether or not she actually sent these replies to the individuals in question is unclear, but to Eileen her victory was in publicly shaming her attackers. Of course, Eileen's Post also alludes to the (regionally) classed nature of this narrative about 'lefties', as

discussed in 5.5, and of her own sense of being devalued, as she sarcastically rejects a representation of (working class) Northerners as having large numbers of (potentially illegitimate) children. Here Eileen also asserts her worth in this debate with relation to gendered and classed forms of respectability in her depiction of Northern women as responsible, hard-working and pragmatic (Skeggs, 1997). George, a Northeast-based retired civil servant, described a similar sense of being dismissed and patronised around an argument with a younger Brexiteer Facebook user:

Because I'm older, he doesn't think older people should have the same sort of voting rights as younger people (...) He was trying to use his accountancy knowledge to say how he was better informed than anybody else. (George, interview 1)

As has been explored throughout the thesis, and in line with some of the sentiments found in prior research on Brexit (see 2.4.2), participants felt that, as Brexit supporters, they were portrayed by media and politicians as having 'not known what they were doing' when they voted in the referendum, as racist for problematising immigration and Islam, and as having 'abandoned rationality in favour of passion' (Moss et al., 2020, p. 838; e.g. G. Hewitt, 2016). In fact, Moss et al. (2020, p. 847) found in their study based on responses to a Mass Observation Archive directive around Brexit that Remainer respondents indeed 'often portrayed Leave voters as uneducated, either unwilling or unable to understand and engage with expert arguments, and therefore more susceptible to lies'. They also found that 'Leave voters were aware of the emotional charges against them' (ibid). In response to these perceived misrepresentations, participants in the current study asserted their factfulness²¹ and that of their arguments through their Facebook Posts, their interactions with those in opposing camps, and their descriptions of these interactions to me.

As outlined in Chapter 2, Ylä-Anttila (2018) found in his study that 'contemporary right-wing anti-immigration populism' is less inclined to champion 'common sense' but rather advocates 'counterknowledge'. He defines this as 'alternative knowledge which challenges establishment knowledge, replacing knowledge authorities with new ones, thus providing an opportunity for political mobilisation' (ibid, p. 359). Ylä-Anttila

²¹ I use this here not as reference to Hans Rosling's term (Rosling et al., 2018), but to denote a state of holding (a large amount of) facts.

argues that these challenges to elite knowledge are particularly useful to populism, based on his finding that, in the case of Finnish anti-immigrant groups online,

many anti-immigration activists ... claim to hold knowledge, truth, and evidence in high esteem, even professing strictly positivist views, and strongly opposing ambivalent or relativist truth orientations ... they advocate a particular kind of objectivist counter-expertise. For them, it is the 'multiculturalist elite' who are 'post-truth' (ibid, p. 357-8).

His analysis resonates strongly with the attitudes of participants in the current study, and importantly locates these attitudes within broader contemporary right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist trends.

As was touched upon in 6.2, participants were eager to construct themselves as objective information seekers who verified facts by doing their research. In turn, it was Remainers and 'lefties' who were presented by participants as irrational 'snowflakes' who had been duped by 'Project Fear', did not want to face the facts, or were far too emotional (in particular, easily offended). For instance, Fred told me of how his sister had switched from a pro-Remain to a pro-Leave position based on the information she had found:

My sister was absolutely adamant that she wanted to stay in the EU. Absolutely no question about it – she would not be turned. Now she has, because she's seen the facts that have come out. She's realised the lies that she was told. (Fred, interview 2)

Fred's description intimates his perceptions of the Remain camp, one which he later clarified by describing Remainers as 'misinformed, or they've accepted what the media have told them instead of checking their facts out' (interview 2). In this sense, contrary to mainstream media portrayals, it is Leavers who are seen as having 'the facts'. As Fred told me in his first interview, 'I try to be reasonable and put forward a structured argument, (...) but they, perhaps just they don't have an argument to put back, they turn to abuse'.

Alongside this portrayal as mere victims of misinformation, Remainers and those on the left were also seen as actively ignoring the facts, privileging instead emotions in

their politics. About her conflicts over the violent teachings of Islam, Jessica said, ‘So, there’s a lot of people that still don’t want to face the facts (...) I’m just telling you the facts of what it [the Qur’an] says’ (interview 1). Here there is no room for subjectivity when it comes to the truth: facts are facts and Remainers and ‘lefties’ need only to accept them. Olivia echoed this when she relayed an encounter she had with an acquaintance, Ted²², who she described as ‘incredibly opinionated’ and ‘not prepared to discuss or debate anything’. At a gathering of friends, the topic of Brexit came up, and Ted was passionately disagreeing with another individual’s pro-Leave position, ‘f-ing and blinding screaming and shouting at [the other man]’. Olivia told him,

‘You have to look at the evidence’. I said, ‘I’m not interested in opinions. I’m only ever interested in the evidence (...) the evidence is there’. (...) But he’s one of these people that seems to be so brainwashed (...) that he wasn’t prepared, Natalie, to listen or even read the actual facts (...) I said ‘well you give me one good reason’ (...) He wasn’t *able* to give a reason (...) and I said, ‘and however I voted is irrelevant (...) It’s factual whether you like it or not, Ted, this is the biggest vote in history’ (...) Then of course he came out with the usual diatribe, didn’t he? ‘Oh, people don’t know what they were voting for’. What, 17 and a half million of them?! [laughs] (Olivia, interview 1)

In this anecdote, Olivia simultaneously constructs herself as evidence-based, factual and unbiased, while depicting Ted as emotional, fact-less and ridiculous, able only to repeat meaningless slogans. This was summarised well by Helen when she said, ‘Brexiters are far more informed and (...) less emotional. It’s almost as if the people that want to remain are having some kind of tantrum’ (interview 2). These portrayals echo those found by Moss et al. (2020), many of whose respondents expressed anger and exasperation at the public expressions of emotion by Remainers following the referendum result. Their research found that this anger towards Remainers ‘aimed to puncture the entitlement of those used to getting their own way’ (ibid, p. 12).

Further, contrary to claims in the ‘post-truth’ literature, participants derided emotionality and called for *more* factualness. For instance, Deborah criticised

²² A pseudonym.

journalists for having become ‘far too opinionated. I think they’ve become too forceful. To me a journalist should be there to observe and report, but they’re not anymore’ (interview 2). Here Deborah’s use of the term ‘forceful’ reflects her perception of the ‘mainstream media’ (see 5.5.3) as not only too subjective, but also pushing their subjective viewpoints onto audiences. The EU itself did not escape these accusations, with Fred describing then President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker (one of the ‘villains’ in participants’ metanarrative – see 5.2 – and who became a meme among participants as ‘Jean-Claude Drunker’ after stumbling at an event) as ‘Irrational. Absolutely irrational’ (interview 2).

Participants also made reference to anti-racist challenges to traditionally accepted historical narratives, and used these to construct those on the left as irrational, ridiculous, ignorant and even hateful. Such controversy had particularly come to the fore since the Charlottesville (Virginia, US) ‘Unite the Right’ rally against the removal of a statue of a Confederate general in August 2017 (Winter, 2017). Acknowledging the shortcomings and dangers of conventional historical narratives is interpreted by right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist discourses as ignoring or attempting to change the facts of history itself (Walker et al., 2020). As Neil said, ‘you can’t pretend it never happened’ (interview 1).

Several participants challenged left-wing attempts to problematise historical representations. Isaac disputed the factualness of US movements who were ‘destroying (...) history statues and history’, accusing them of ignorance: ‘you read back into it, it’s only gone on for, they’ve only had that statue for 200 years or something, 100 years, you know’ (interview 2). These narratives, based on a post-racial frame and ‘white amnesia’ that seek to deny racist and colonial histories, echo the findings of Joseph-Salisbury (2019). In his analysis of the online backlash to a piece he wrote that was meant as an anti-racist challenge to the glorification of Winston Churchill, Joseph-Salisbury demonstrates the way in which he as the author was portrayed by online Commenters as racist, pathologically confused and unintelligent, motivated by emotions such as jealousy and intolerance (ibid). Participants’ narratives about contested history were at times equally scathing and personal, expressing disgust and hatred (see 6.5.1).

Of course, while this was in part constructed as a matter of facing up to the facts of history, it was simultaneously a matter of defending national pride and identity, as Mark demonstrated:

‘Oh colonialists’, as if it’s some really bad thing and everything about the British was, has been awful and shocking and terrible (...) well actually I’m quite proud that it was us [that] had an empire (...) cos if it hadn’t have been the British Empire it woulda been the French empire or the Spanish empire (...) if there’d never been any empires in the whole wide world, brilliant, that’s even better, but there’s always gunna be empires, or there’s always been empires. We just happened to have the biggest empire in the world (...) What was right then might not be right now. But don’t say that that’s a disgrace and belittle it (...) Because it’s not a disgrace. It’s not.
(Mark, interview 2)

Mark did not want to have the version of history he cherished discarded. Like many participants, his perceived exclusion (or that of what he saw as the ignored majority group to which he belonged) from decisions about historical and other forms of knowledge was a source of dismay. This should also be interpreted within the context of romanticisation of empire by the Leave campaign and the imputed spectre of its revival post-Brexit (Virdee & McGeever, 2018). Mark’s privileging of identity and pride also demonstrates the way in which participants’ claims to being entirely rational and factual were not always consistent. However, the key was constructing themselves as *more* factual than the opposition: ‘[Brexit Pages] sometimes bend the truth, some of them, but they get the point across (...) At least it’s not out and out lies like Remain come out with’ (Fred, interview 2).

At the same time, particularly when it came to predictions about the economic consequences of Brexit (known in participants’ milieu as ‘Project Fear’), participants argued that the Remain camp was lying or grasping at straws, because in fact there was no way to determine what would happen post-Brexit. In other words, participants challenged Remainers’ power to produce such knowledge, based on the assertion that no one has claim to that knowledge. As George said to me about the exchange rate, ‘the fact is it’s been fluctuating for years (...) You can’t just blame Brexit (...) It could be anything’ (interview 1). Similarly, Mark told me, ‘the Remain people are just all over

the place. They'll talk about car crashes and falling over cliffs and things like that (...) Nobody can tell what the future's gonna hold' (interview 1).

Davis (2019, p. 134) in his study of the transnational nature of online far-right movements in Australia (see 2.3.2), identifies the use of criticisms like 'social justice warrior', 'cultural Marxist' and 'snowflake' as 'intended to discredit opposition by portraying their concerns as a function of ideological self-interest'. These terms were also used by participants in their interviews and in the content they Shared, and the conflict over truth here mirrored that played out in the alt-right's obsession with 'cultural Marxism' (Mirrlees, 2018). As discussed in 2.3.2, this increasingly popular 'conspiracy theory of power' (ibid, p. 51) acts as 'a symbol for every liberal or left-leaning group the right [has] defined itself against' (ibid, p. 49). Mirrlees discusses the feeling of 'being "in the know", of having special insight into the truth of society', as one potential explanation for the popularity of the 'cultural Marxism' thesis among the alt-right. Although he dismisses this hypothesis as 'far too charitable to those responsible for propagating [the theory]' (ibid, p. 58), the above evidence of the importance of information and truth to participants and their sense of dignity and agency suggest that this analysis holds some weight here.

As was made clear in Chapter 5, much of the significance of theories like that of 'cultural Marxism' lies in notions of power. Popular alt-right figure Jordan Peterson, who publicly 'battles' 'leftists' in viral online videos, famously attributes blame for Western society's ills to 'Marxism'. In Nicholls' (2019) analysis, Peterson epitomises the kind of counterknowledge described by Ylä-Anttila (2018), as he constructs himself as a counter-attack to dogmatic, poisonous and irrational post-modernism (Nicholls, 2019, p. 59). According to Nicholls, Peterson 'strikes a chord with New Right empty signifiers such as "it's political correctness gone mad", and the notion that political power in a "left-wing" form is elitist and authoritarian finds traction in these ideas' (ibid, p. 60).

In summary, participants in this study challenged the perceived anti-Brexit and pro-'left' regime of truth by constructing truth as something not provided by mainstream media outlets and other institutions of authority. Knowledge and truth had to be actively sought and uncovered through research online, something which Remainers and 'lefties' failed to do. Disputes with these groups over factfulness appeared to stem from

participants' feelings of marginalisation and their desire to reclaim a stake in knowledge production; having been positioned as irrational racists who were duped by 'fake news' campaigns and 'didn't know what they were voting for', they threw this accusation back at Remainers and in turn emphasised their own rationality and appreciation of evidence. As Helen put it, 'We're sick of being told we're wrong. We're sick of being told we're stupid. We're sick of being told they know better than we do' (interview 2).

6.4 Trust and evidence: What constitutes knowledge?

Participants' claims to factfulness and narratives around uncovering truths online raised questions about the criteria by which they deemed knowledge legitimate. In so much as researching and uncovering truth was constructed as an active process, undoubtedly this required participants to make decisions about the accuracy and legitimacy of the information they encountered, about who and what to trust when determining what constitutes knowledge. This section addresses these questions based on participants' narratives around trust, knowledge and evidence.

6.4.1 'It's a minefield': Navigating between fact and fiction

Participants acknowledged that while social media was an invaluable resource, not everything online could be trusted. There was a general awareness that there was 'an awful lot of fake news out there' (Neil, interview 1) as 'it's so easy to credit something and discredit on social media' (Isaac, interview 1). As Neil said, 'you have to be very careful who you're listening to and you have to have validated evidence, and that's not always easy' (interview 1). As discussed in 4.3.1, 6.2 and 6.3 above, participants insisted they were not naïve: 'I don't believe them all' (Kirk, interview 1). When determining the legitimacy of information, 'obviously then you have to start to research' (Beatrice interview 2) and do 'due diligence' as Neil repeatedly described it. Many participants told me they would indeed 'usually investigate further' (George, interview 1). This was ordinarily a case of utilising search engines like Google as a starting point to 'seek to validate [information] by going on to other places and following other leads' (Neil, interview 1). Other methods of verifying information included enquiring with a reputable 'source' (Eileen) or relative (Audrey), or in Isaac's case Posting the content to his Wall and waiting for 'friends that are that big a spotters [sic]' to discredit it (interview 1). In the end, determining fact from fiction was an active and individual

process; as Isaac told me, ‘I just like gathering information in and then I make me own mind up’ (interview 2).

However, such remarks shed little light on the criteria that participants actually employed to determine what was genuine or true to them. In some cases there were direct and obvious contradictions, within the same interview, between statements like ‘I always check before I Post things on’ and admissions that a Post ‘was one of those things I didn’t have a chance to research, there was so many other things going on’ (Neil, interview 2). Indeed, participants’ narratives about their research-driven objectivity were sometimes overshadowed by instances of quite easily falsifiable ‘fake news’ that I observed them Sharing (see Figures 13 and 14).

Figure 13: Example of falsified content Shared by Deborah²³



Figure 14: Example of falsified content Shared by Beatrice²⁴



²³ This was one of two images photoshopped to look like headlines from the Guardian Online.

²⁴ A Facebook Page named ‘America’s Last Line of Defence’ claims to have created this image in order to trap Trump supporters into Sharing fake content and humiliate them; neither the date (31 June) nor the publication (The Harvard Sentinel) referenced exist.

Nonetheless, in an era where knowledge production was being ‘democratised’ by social media and institutions of authority no longer had a monopoly on truth (W. L. Bennett & Livingston, 2018), to participants any information could (or should) be viewed with scepticism. The Christchurch mosque shootings (March 2019), which occurred during the project fieldwork, was a revealing case. With right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist organisations and personalities implicated in the shooter’s radicalisation, as mentioned in 5.5.3, deeply troubling conspiracy theories were quickly generated in more radical milieus that labelled the event a ‘false flag’ concocted by New World Order governments to legitimate their globalist pro-diversity plans or instigate a war between the West and Islam.

Having observed content propagating such conspiracy theories in participants’ milieu, I had the opportunity to discuss the massacre with two of my participants in their follow-up interviews. While Olivia was adamant that the massacre was fabricated, Lawrence was suspicious yet irresolute. Despite divulging that ‘I honestly thought it was some kind of, fake staged event’ because other users had pointed out things like a lack of blood visible in footage of the attack, Lawrence was extremely hesitant, repeating that ‘I didn’t know what to make of it’, assuring me that he would not wish the massacre on anyone, and ending our discussion of the topic with ‘I made no comments on it and I didn’t really wanna say anything else about it’ (interview 2). Here Lawrence’s attitude alluded to the fact that this particular conspiracy theory, despite seeming plausible to him, was perhaps too controversial or distasteful (given the number of deaths and the global outpouring of grief) for most to admit subscribing to, and this was reflected in the fact that only a very small number of participants Posted about it at the time.

According to participants’ ontological narratives (Somers, 1994, p. 618), for them to believe something, there needed to be proof. Mark, who like many participants emphasised that ‘I’ll always research things’ (interview 2), told me that his inclination to defend figures like Jacob Rees Mogg, Nigel Farage and ‘Tommy Robinson’ from accusations of unsavoury character was based on not being able to find sufficient evidence to support such claims online:

Where’s the evidence for all this? (...) I won’t just turn round and say somebody is this and somebody is that because they don’t believe the same

thing as me (...) If people are gunna start labelling somebody I want to know why they're labelling em (...) And, as far as I can see and as far as my recent looking on Facebook and things like that and looking on Google, the man [Farage] has never directly came out and said anything he shouldn't. (Mark, interview 1)

The motives behind such accusations by the left were also the object of criticism, but Mark explicitly accounted for his own assessment on the basis of what was considered rational, factual research. His developing sympathy towards 'Tommy Robinson' between our first and second interviews is particularly interesting. Initially he told me that despite having found no evidence of claims that 'Robinson' was racist, he was 'not brave enough' to challenge these accusations as 'the man's name's tarnished'. However, he told me, 'I'm also not gunna go and say he's an evil man unless I find evidence that he is evil. I can't find it. I mean, it's obviously there somewhere – it's got to be' (interview 1). By our second interview, Mark had 'done quite a bit of looking him up' including watching the *Panodrama* video 'Robinson' had made (see 5.5.3), and although he conceded 'the jury's still out' and he 'daren't write too much stuff' (interview 2) for fear of being called a racist, he defended 'Robinson' to me at length, pointing to how the man had apologised for things he had said in the past, and sympathised with him for being shouted down and called names by the media. Mark's comments highlight the importance he placed on 'evidence' and doing one's own research. They also reveal how, even if he was not sure whether he liked or agreed with 'Robinson', what he disagreed with most were the 'left's' personal and (perceived) baseless attacks on him.

Overall, while 'it's a very hard question of who to trust' (Deborah, interview 2), and despite the existence of things like 'fake news' online, social media was seen as a far more trustworthy source than the mainstream media. Its status as an alternative source of information to large outlets tarnished by 'left-wing' agendas was key to this. As Deborah stated,

Don't get me wrong, not for a minute am I saying that everything that goes on Facebook is correct. But I think there's more that is. (Deborah, interview 2)

6.4.2 'It's just common sense, to be fair'

Participants' narratives also revealed that 'common sense' was of key importance in determining truth and making decisions about reality. As Neil told me, 'To know which path to take, which one to believe, who to follow (...) That's something that comes with time, with experience, and from common sense' (interview 2). For instance, when I asked Kirk about a Post he had written rejecting the way the media was attributing job losses at Nissan to Brexit, he explained that given the direction of the automobile industry, 'my common sense tells me it's not right' (interview 2).

Unfortunately, in participants' perceptions of politics today, common sense was a resource in short supply. Much like knowledge and rationality, this was constructed as something that participants and their allies had, while 'lefties' and Remainers did not. Isaac, for instance, expressed his exasperation with protracted Brexit negotiations which he believed should have been simple: 'they wanna trade with us, we wanna trade with them. Businesses wanna trade. It's only the politicians that are pissing about basically (...) what's the hassle?' (interview 2). In fact, in participants' views there were a range of issues that could be solved with common sense. For instance, immigration: 'I mean, if you're gonna let too many people in your country and you don't vet them (...) what are they gonna do?' (Carl, interview 1); social media censorship: 'Well obviously there are certain terms that are derogatory. And I think most people know what those are' (Deborah, interview 1); and third-world poverty, 'What would work is send some people over to Africa, put some coffee processing plants up, (...) give them some actual work (...) [instead] Angela Merkel invites a load of people, the bitch, and what does she know?' (Eileen, interview 1).

Participants also frequently drew on analogies that spoke to common sense in order to account for their positions. As Kirk explained regarding calls for a second referendum on Brexit,

It's like the Ryder Cup (...) If America beat us by half a point and took the Ryder Cup off us, and we all went, 'oh no, so close (...) we wanna do that again', you can't at the Ryder Cup (...) They won, and that's it – by the smallest margin, it's a win. But I think because [Remainers] ain't got any common sense... (Kirk, int2)

Such analogies were also used to highlight the idea that there was one rule for ‘us’ (Brexiters or those on the right) and another rule for ‘them’. This included assertions that ‘I would have accepted it, and I know all my friends who voted Leave would have accepted it if (...) the vote had been for Remain’ (Mark, interview 1). Olivia’s frustration at the news that the Public Prosecution Service was considering charging soldiers responsible for the deaths of civilians on ‘Bloody Sunday’ was also justified with analogous reasoning: ‘the man is 77 and they now want to take him to court, yet the IRA criminals, they gave them all a pardon. You know, and you just think eugh! Where’s the logic?’ (interview 2).

Alongside such analogies, participants also frequently employed anecdotal evidence, including from content they encountered on social media, to account for their stances. For instance, Kirk referred to an incident in which a young girl ‘got stabbed somewhere’ in the UK and said ‘the guy was from, not Moldova [sic] or, or some country out there (...) If he wasn’t in the country she’d still be alive. Simple plain fact. So immigration ain’t great’ (interview 2). Participants also extrapolated from their own experiences to evidence their claims, in a ‘believe what I see’ attitude. For example, foreign aid was one issue on which participants were united in their opposition, and Jessica accounted for this stance by asserting (in a reference to similar comments by Donald Trump the previous year) that ‘it’s not really going to the people otherwise Africa would be very rich by now (...) I’ve been to Africa. It *is* a shit hole’ (interview 1, Jessica’s emphasis). Similarly, Helen attested that, contrary to the narrative that it was ‘mainly older people that voted out’, she knew ‘loads of youngsters that voted Brexit! They will never tell you, because of what my daughter went through at school. *Fact*’ (interview 2, Helen’s emphasis).

Participants’ valorising of common sense is reminiscent of traditional understandings of populism as anti-intellectual (Wodak, 2015, p. 22), or what has sometimes been called ‘epistemological populism’ (Saurette & Gunster, 2011), which takes advantage of a broader emotional regime in which ‘gut feelings’ are generally perceived as more authentic (Moss et al., 2020). Of course, placing high levels of trust in individual anecdotes, experiences or gut feelings would appear to be at odds with participants’ self-narratives about being rational and objective in their information seeking. In his study, Ylä-Anttila (2018) claims that ‘rural’ populism, which valorised common sense,

has been mostly replaced by ‘contemporary right-wing populism’, which promotes the type of ‘counterknowledge’ discussed above. However, the results of the current study challenge such a dichotomy, in that both forms of logic were employed and valorised, sometimes in complex and overlapping ways.

As discussed in Chapter 4, aspects of social media logic like algorithmic targeting likely made it considerably easier for participants to encounter content on Facebook that resonated with their own personal experiences and thus potentially contributed to the use of this reasoning. However, most notable here is the way in which this logic is employed to challenge elite claims to knowledge, also illustrated by participants’ claims to represent majority opinion based on their interactions within their own milieus. As Helen told me, ‘There are so many people that feel as I do (...) They *know* it’s happening, they’re not wrong, it’s what they *see*. You can’t argue with what you see’ (interview 1, Helen’s emphasis). Here Helen does not only claim to understand and represent the majority, but also emphasises the epistemic logic of felt and situated knowledge.

Thus, in participants’ narratives, ‘common sense’ did not merely represent a gut feeling or the inevitable subjectivity of human values. Rather, it symbolised the rejection of elite knowledge. As Eileen Shared on her Wall, ‘Common sense is a gift often unrecognisable to those who think they’ve had an education during their indoctrination’ (original text Post). This notion is exemplified by the use of the term ‘cultural Marxism’ by participants like Eileen and Helen to refer to the way in which institutions of authority preached understandings of the world laden with ‘leftist’ morals, and to discredit institutionalised and formally recognised forms of knowledge-based cultural capital on this basis.

6.4.3 Who to trust

Although their common sense or ‘own judgment’ (Deborah, interview 2) was essential to participants’ discerning truth from falsity, there also existed particularly venerated personalities within their milieus who often served as experts as much as leaders. As stated in Chapter 4, many participants told me they did not actively follow particular Pages. However, their narratives around individuals like ‘Tommy Robinson’ or Jacob Rees-Mogg revealed important aspects of their attitudes about who and what to trust within this arena of contested knowledge.

For Olivia and Neil, who were among the handful of participants who did avidly follow particular online influencers and YouTube channels, the key was that these personalities were ‘informative’ (Olivia, interview 2), providing ‘lots and lots of information’ (Neil, interview 2). This reflected the value placed on knowledge described in 6.2. As Olivia explained about one individual,

The reason I like him is because he does Post up factual information, so like I say, he will use things such as Pew Research to show statistical figures in certain topics. (...) when they can show proof, those are the people that I follow (...) Anyone that is labelled as a true scholar, and, who really knows their topic. (interview 1)

Neil also described those whose information he trusted online as ‘accredited doctors, medical professors, research people, (...) people that you learn to trust because things they’ve said and done in the past have come true’ (interview 2). This epistemic logic reflected the positivist nature of the claims studied by Ylä-Anttila (2018, p. 369), in which ‘truths about society are assumed to be accessible by scientific methods’. Such claims are used to challenge ‘leftist’ epistemic authority, blaming ‘post-positivist’ social science for “‘distorted”, “‘subjective” and “‘biased” views on truth’ (ibid).

Narratives around trustworthy figures, while in many ways consistent with participants’ above-discussed construction of themselves as evidenced-based and rational, also reflected the importance they placed on common sense or ‘straight-talking’. As Kirk said about one individual online, ‘I’ll sit and listen to her, cos she talks straight common sense’ (interview 2). Eileen said of Donald Trump, ‘he is politically, um, undiplomatic, but he’s the best thing to happen to politics in a long time because he tells it like it is’ (interview 2). As Montgomery (2017) has noted in his analysis of Trump’s election campaign, a discourse of ‘authenticity’, rather than one of ‘truth’, was a crucial component of his appeal to voters. The same sort of appeal has been utilised by Nigel Farage and other populist politicians and populist media campaigns (Ekström et al., 2018). This is one of the ways in which populism claims cultural capital, as it ‘signif[ies] closeness to “the people”, as opposed to the perceived remoteness of mainstream political elites’ (ibid, p. 4). Participants acknowledged Trump’s flaws, with Neil for instance describing him as ‘not [laughs] the most attractive person in the world’ (interview 1). Carl even went so far as to say ‘I mean, probably Donald Trump is corrupt,

but the point is he's at least trying to give us something back, give the people back... Not like Hillary Clinton (...) she's just a puppet' (interview 1). This seeming contradiction arguably reflects the relationship between authenticity and fallibility. In an epistemic logic that emphasises the importance of average people, common sense and experience, individuals who are not perfect are more real and thus more credible. However, fallibility had its limits. When I asked Deborah, who had joined UKIP, whether it was then party leader Gerard Battern who she would like to see as Prime Minister, she told me 'There's a lot of things I do like about him, and a lot of things that he says [are] common sense'. 'But', she continued, 'has he got the skills to run a country? I don't know'. Battern certainly did not enjoy the level of popular status of Trump or Farage, but Deborah's uncertainty in our interview may also have been a reflection of the sensitive balance between common sense challenges to elite knowledge and the pressure participants felt to demonstrate that their claims were based on something more concrete or objective.

When it came to common sense and rationality, one need not beget the other, and no politician exemplified this better in participants' minds than Jacob Rees-Mogg. By far the most widely respected British politician in the pro-Leave social media milieu throughout the course of the fieldwork (see Figure 15 for example), Rees-Mogg 'talks common sense, *and* he knows his facts' (Fred, interview 2, my emphasis). That Rees-Mogg was extremely well-informed and direct was repeated by all participants who I asked about him. He was not the only politician publicly and unwaveringly defending Brexit at the time, and in fact was a backbencher and had been generally unknown to participants until recent months. However, his particularly calm and composed demeanour and evidence-based responses to Remain arguments during media appearances appealed to participants' desire to be taken seriously and not have their Brexiteer position dismissed as irrational or non-factual. This is not unlike Nicholls' (2019, pp. 60–63) characterisation of popular alt-right figure Jordan Peterson as 'calm and seemingly well-reasoned' in his performances. Nicholls claims,

This calm disposition is, in fact, crucial for his followers. It demonstrates the strength of his thinking, and the strength of truth, as opposed to the weakness of feminism and postmodernism ... [His] dispassionate

performance sets the voice of reason up in a binary relationship against the emotional, passionate postmodern other.

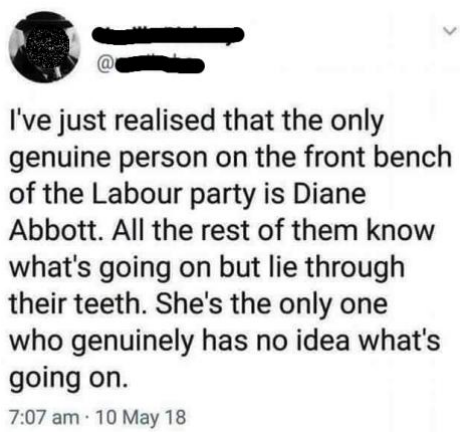
Beatrice emphasised the way in which Jacob Rees-Mogg when challenged, rather than becoming angry, ‘very politely and succinctly [would] just say “no, that’s not true.”’ (interview 2). As Fred’s description exemplified, ‘He can deal with any argument that’s put to him, I’ve never seen him lost for words yet. And he comes up with the facts and he’s bang on’ (interview 2). This was contrasted by participants with portrayals of Diane Abbott (see Figure 16). Her misspeaking on budget spending in the run-up to the 2017 General Election became a familiar meme in participants’ milieu and led to her being ridiculed and called sarcastic names like ‘Diane Abacus’ (Carl, interview 1). This contrast reflects both the racialised and gendered nature of such appraisals.

Kirk’s assessment of Rees-Mogg also alluded to dissatisfaction with the perceived corrupt nature of politics: ‘he don’t beat around the bush (...) it’s a more direct, and a truthful side of a politician’ (interview 1). Despite being extremely wealthy and an unapologetic member of the upper class, Rees-Mogg stood out in contrast to a lot of other politicians who ‘are in it just for the money and the perks’ (Fred, interview 2). Like Trump, who was similarly described as ‘direct’ in a way that was preferred by ‘the common person’ (Kirk, interview 2), Rees-Mogg gave participants a ‘straight talking’, and presumably incorruptibly wealthy, representative for their views, ‘a voice for us’ (Kirk, interview 2). Interestingly, participants stressed that they did not always agree with Rees-Mogg’s stances on issues like abortion or his negative assessment of ‘Tommy Robinson’, but these disagreements could be overlooked (or put down to a Trump-like authentic confidence) given the credible and undefeatable manner in which he defended their claims to knowledge in the public arena.

Figure 15: Image Shared by Mark from pro-Brexit Group ‘Unity News Network’



Figure 16: Image Shared by Fred, a screenshot of a tweet



In summary, participants’ narratives about who and what to trust and how to discern fact from fiction online sometimes contradicted their claims to rationality and objectivity. However, these narratives did mirror the desire discussed in the previous section to reclaim control of knowledge from ‘left-wing’ forms of knowledge production that seemed entirely removed from their lived experiences and sensibilities. Meanwhile, the elite and wealthy backgrounds of figures like Trump and Rees-Mogg were overlooked in favour of their ‘straight talking’ authenticity, and in Rees-Mogg’s case his ability to win arguments against Remainers with hard facts. ‘Gut feeling’ and positivist epistemologies were employed side-by-side; ‘common sense’ was not viewed as deviating from rationality, but was used to reframe what was rational around what resonated with participants. Moss et al. (2020, p. 848) similarly found that while

simultaneously condemning those who were seen as trusting their emotions, their respondents constructed a narrative of trusting their ‘gut feeling’ as a source of knowledge. They noted Sara Ahmed’s (2004, pp. 13–14) observation that emotions may be seen as superior to ‘thought’ when depicted as a form of intelligence. It is precisely this complex and contradictory relationship between emotions and knowledge that I turn to in the next and final section of this chapter.

6.5 Engagement with knowledge as an affective experience

As noted above, emerging from analysis of participants’ narratives about facts and knowledge was a complex relationship between rationality, sensibility, and values. Alongside narratives of objectivity, we have already seen how their struggle to lay claim to knowledge was clearly saturated with emotions such as indignation, pride and frustration. In fact, high levels of obvious passion and emotionality were evident throughout interviews and Facebook observations, and there were clear ways in which these emotions mattered in participants’ sense-making online.

This should come as no surprise given the centrality of emotions in our social and political lives, and in mediated politics in particular (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 1). As McDonald (2018, p. 16) argues, ‘Today, we are much more aware that communication takes place within and constitutes (...) “affective fabrics,”’ or ‘the lived and deeply felt everyday sociality of connections, ruptures, emotions, words, politics and sensory energies’ (see also Kuntsman, 2012, p. 2). However, it has been noted that sociology has yet to adequately investigate the role of emotions in engagement with politics (Manning & Holmes, 2014, p. 699), and this has of course been illustrated by the ‘post-truth’ claims which are challenged by this chapter. This section demonstrates the importance of emotions (see 2.2.3 for a definition of this and of ‘affect’) to participants’ political engagement, and discusses the implications of this to the relationship between this and their preoccupation with knowledge.

6.5.1 Locating emotion in participants’ narratives: Animosity, anxiety and moral outrage

As noted above, while participants placed a high value on knowledge and ‘facts’, their engagement with these was not unemotional or unaffected. Participants conveyed high

levels of passion about Brexit and surrounding issues, and in particular their narratives revealed emotions such as disgust, shock, and anger. The prevalence of these boundary-drawing emotions was reflective of the emotionally-charged subject matter with which they were engaged.

The following description by Lawrence of then Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn is a prime example of this emotionality: ‘He’s the most grotesque, two-faced, lying little weasel that could ever be in politics’ (interview 2). This depiction of Corbyn as a repulsive monster was intimated by Lawrence with a palpable sense of disgust. Sara Ahmed discusses disgust at length, defining it in one sense as ‘to be affected by what one has rejected’, a feeling of ‘sickening invasion’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 86). Importantly, she goes on to point out that when bodies become the object of this, disgust becomes crucial to power (ibid, p. 88), and that communicating disgust ‘generates a community of those who are bound together through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event’ (ibid, p. 94). In this way we can see from Lawrence’s comment the utility of disgust to divisive and exclusionary politics like that in which the participants were engaged, and to their desire to challenge their own marginalisation.

This is echoed by Asahina’s (2019, p. 127) point that in right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist activism, ‘emotions inform individuals to make sense of the difference between them and specified “others.”’ Disgust is one such emotion, as is hate, which can also be detected in Lawrence’s description, and in Mark’s characterisation of a Green MSP he had seen criticising Winston Churchill. When I asked Mark about an article he had Posted to his Wall, entitled ‘Churchill “was a White Supremacist and Mass Murderer” – Green MSP’ (see Figure 17), he remarked, ‘I mean [the MSP] really annoyed me (...) he’s horrible, he’s so smug (...) I don’t like him’. Mark expressed his disdain much more fervently in the Comment he had added to the (already quite scathing) Post, employing personal insults: ‘smirking, know it all, irritating, annoying, low life scumbag. Can’t for the life of me imagine he has any friends. Face only a mother could love & everyone else would like to smack’.

Figure 17: Image Shared by Mark of a newspaper article with accompanying Comment



Although participants rarely used the term ‘hate’, narratives outlined in the previous chapter demonstrate varying levels of contempt, animosity and resentment towards those deemed ‘villains’ in the metanarrative. The following comment by Helen illustrates these emotions explicitly:

You’ve got people like Diane Abbott going ‘oh this place is too white’ (...) Hate that woman. And I don't say that about many people, and one of their colleagues, (...) Emily Thornberry. Hate that woman. I don't hate, I just despise what comes out of her mouth, do you know what I mean? I don't hate anybody. (Helen, interview 2)

During this portion of the interview, Helen was becoming increasingly worked up about her contempt for left-wing politics. Perhaps all too aware of the accusations of emotionality aimed at Brexiteers and those on the right, she quickly checked herself and assured me that she was not someone who ‘hates’ others. However, her replacement of this term with ‘despise’ does little to disguise her contempt.

Hate is identified by Sara Ahmed as central to the kind of right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist discourses consumed and circulated by participants. This hate is closely linked to patriotic emotions, as it is purported that a love for the nation is what drives hate towards those who are depicted as seeking to take that nation, its history and its future away. In this sense, ‘It is the emotional reading of hate that works to stick or to bind the imagined subjects and the white nation together’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 43). That is, while hate, like disgust, works to ‘create the outline of different figures or objects of hate’ it also brings into being the ‘white subject’ (ibid, p. 43). Importantly, in racism and white nationalism, hate circulates ‘between figures’ (ibid, p. 45). It is signalled by evoking a sense of ‘threat and risk’, the source of which is not made simple to locate by these discourses, and this is reflected in the shifting array of ‘villains’ promoting dangerous liberal change identified in participants’ narratives (see Chapter 5). Ahmed argues, ‘It is the failure of hate to be located in a given object or figure, which allows it to generate the effects that it does’ (ibid, p. 49). This ill-defined ‘sense that something is not right’ gives emotion its power in exclusionary politics (Moss et al., 2020, p. 847).

When it comes to animosity towards Remainers in particular, as discussed in 5.5, an intense ‘affective polarisation’ has been identified (Hobolt et al., 2020). Boler and Davis (2018, p. 76) also use the term polarisation to describe the contemporary political predicament, arguing that this ‘is fundamentally at the level of emotionality’ and that ‘[t]his affectively reactionary disagreement is especially fostered by social media practices and algorithms’. This idea of the significance of emotion to Brexit divisions is supported by Verbalyte and von Scheve’s (2018) analysis demonstrating a correlation between negative emotions and Euroscepticism, and Rosa and Ruiz’s (2020) findings that among tweets by key political actors in the final weeks before the referendum, those appealing to emotions or debasing opposing views tended to generate the most engagement. Wahl-Jorgensen (2016) has also argued that the referendum campaign relied on appeals to fear.

Participants in the current study certainly spoke of their anxieties around social and demographic change. For instance, Fred located his issue with Islam not in any form of hatred or disgust, but in his ‘worry’ about extremism and violence, before transposing responsibility for that anxiety onto the Muslim population more broadly:

I've got Muslim friends, you know, I don't have a problem with Muslims as such, it's the extremists, the radical side. They're the ones I'm concerned about, but I'm also worried that the moderate Muslims who are just getting on with life, aren't condemning it. I'm worried that mosques are covering up what's happening as has been exposed recently (...) that there was an extremist speaker there days before the Ariani [sic] thing, (...) the actual talk that he gave was recorded, and it is very violent and is very anti-British and is encouraging people to go and do exactly what he did. (Fred, interview 1)

Here, like Helen, Fred makes clear attempts to assure me that his negative emotions are not irrational or baseless. His comment is, however, illustrative of a general discourse of fear around Islam (and subsequently Muslims) that permeated participants' interviews and was more blatantly explicit in some of the content they Shared on Facebook. This reflects prior findings mentioned in 5.4.4 that Leave supporters were more likely to subscribe to anti-Muslim sentiment, conspiracist beliefs and a sense of threat (Swami et al., 2018).

But perhaps most frequently and passionately expressed by participants were angry emotions like frustration and outrage. For instance, phrases like 'I can't stand it' (Mark, interview 2), 'gets my goat' (Kirk, interviews 1 and 2) and 'totally pisses me off' (Carl, interview 2) were used, and participants like Beatrice, Deborah and Helen in particular expressed palpable frustration at the current social and political climate. As described in 4.3.2, Beatrice joked in our follow-up interview about feeling so frustrated that she felt like going out in the street naked to get someone's attention. As the interview progressed, however, she became much more serious about this frustration, her tone increasingly heated in a fervent attempt to convey this:

... people are, (...) just, they're not having it anymore! (...) I am concerned about our country, (...) because you *can't* get a hospital appointment, you *can't* get a dental appointment, (...) you asked me um, why people, they're fed up! They're fed up of having, being afraid to speak. Of not being allowed to take your dog for a walk because it offends them [Muslims], you know. And, they've just had enough... (Beatrice, interview 2, Beatrice's emphasis)

The prevalence of anger in participants' narratives is hardly surprising. As Wahl-Jorgensen (2019, p. 169) argues, 'anger is the essential political emotion' because it 'energizes groups of individuals towards a collective response to shared grievances'. That is, anger goes hand-in-hand with political struggles like that in which participants were engaged. Hochschild (2016) locates contemporary right-wing frustration in a clash of 'feeling rules'. In her analysis, based on ethnography with Tea Party supporters in Louisiana, '[t]he right seeks release from liberal notions of what they should feel – happy for the gay newlywed, sad at the plight of Syrian refugees, unresentful about paying taxes' (ibid, p. 22). Such an interpretation is closely related to the way in which participants felt that social truths were being produced by others on their behalf, and their sense of loss of control over the regime of knowledge in contemporary society. That is, their emotionality was in some ways another product of the perceived marginalisation that is central to the argument of this thesis.

Another important component of participants' frustration was outrage. They often spoke in interviews of their feelings about perceived injustices, whether that be regarding attempts to delay or derail Brexit, the liberal bias in the media, or 'unfair' treatment of minorities. Audrey relayed to me a story she had encountered online, in which a 'white man' who 'found out' about 'Indian men' in 'grooming gangs' received a thirteen-month jail sentence while the perpetrators walked free. 'That's kind of like a smack in the face', she said. 'I felt very strongly about that because I thought, that's wrong, that. That is wrong' (interview 1). Similarly, while Carl spoke at length in his follow-up interview about the economic and security issues posed by immigration, his narratives intimated that notions of the financial impact of refugee programmes or the actual ability of infrastructure like schools or hospitals to handle population growth were eclipsed by feelings of unfairness, marginalisation and subsequent outrage. Carl *felt* as though these *feelings* of his were being ignored. As he told me,

I used to work [over] there and I was lucky if I saw a black person. (...) I've just been walking through there now and I couldn't even bump into a white person if I wanted to. And the culture, the diversity, may be OK for some people. It isn't for me. Because I'm losing my identity. (Carl, interview 2)

These examples are illustrative of the importance of moral outrage to participants' political engagements. Drawing moral boundaries is one way in which to affirm self-worth (Lamont, 1992), which was clearly part of what participants were doing in positioning themselves as more rational, less hot-headed and indeed more 'right' than their political opponents. Asahina (2019, p. 135), in his study of 'far-right activists' in Japan, found this use of moral boundaries particularly salient, arguing that his respondents 'drew a boundary through which they defined themselves as the ones who care about society' in contrast to those who were blind to social crisis or simply self-interested. He spoke of these boundaries in terms of 'moral emotions' – 'the sense of affirmation coming from [activists'] self-recognition of doing the right thing' which arise when 'strong and quick' emotions (like anger, fear or disgust) are channelled into a sustained commitment to the subject matter (ibid, p. 126). In other words, what is defined by Jasper (1997, p. 106) as 'moral shock' may raise interest in right-wing activism, but sustained commitment to such activities is built through 'long-run' emotions, like collective identification and the 'sense of satisfaction when you do a "good thing," [which also] makes you feel "wrong" for not taking part in moral behavior' (Asahina, 2019, p. 127). In this sense, practices of Sharing and Commenting online not only constituted a channel for participants' emotions but also likely played a role in constructing and strengthening these 'moral emotions' relationally (Abbott, 2020). The following sub-section turns to the significance of social media as an arena for such practices and this circulation of affect.

6.5.2 Relational emotions and circulatory affect on Facebook

Even while often focusing on facts and figures, the social media content participants engaged with seemed almost invariably designed to both convey *and invoke* strong emotions in its audience. As Figure 2 (see 4.3.2) illustrates, around 60% of the content participants Shared on Facebook was video or image content. However, images were often embedded with text. Figure 18 is one such example. As each statement is debunked, emphatic markers like exclamation marks and all-caps are used to convey anger and frustration, while the use of facts like the cost of nine million pounds is in itself intended to inflame outrage in the reader. In the final statement, the author separates those living inside the M25 (Londoners) from the 'real' or majority of people, and uses the term 'peddling Westminster lies' to connote accusations of blatant government corruption. All of this is set against a background of a Union Jack to signal

that the arguments of Brexiteers are those of ‘real’ Brits, and to invoke a sense of patriotic pride in the reader.

Figure 18: Image Shared by Kirk



In this way, despite participants’ claims to factfulness and rationality, vast amounts of emotionally provocative content was observed on their Walls, particularly evoking negative emotions like fear, disgust and anger. The disturbing nature of the violent content engaged with by Kirk, and his comments about how stressed this made him feel, have already been mentioned in 4.5.2. However, even without displaying violence itself, content was able to allude to the idea of Muslims and ‘Africans’ as violent or dangerous using imagery, and subsequently provoke feelings of fear and anxiety in users.

Figure 19 represents three in a series of seven images Deborah Shared in a single Post. She Shared this Post directly from another individual’s Page, and neither Deborah nor that individual had added any text Comment; no further explanation was needed as to the warning they wanted to communicate – the imagery speaks for itself. This example reflects a pattern of emotional engagement with the content by participants; having encountered the Post (in her Newsfeed for example), Deborah had *felt* something, sufficient enough to compel her to want to share these warnings with others, and perhaps provoke such anxiety in them also.

Figure 19: Images Shared by Deborah



Evocative imagery was also used in participants' milieu to convey and provoke feelings of disgust like those discussed in the previous sub-section. For instance, Figure 20 is a commentary on modern feminism that was Shared by Fred from a separate Facebook Page. The first image, a black-and-white photo of four well-dressed, smiling women walking proudly side-by-side, is accompanied by the description 'classy, intelligent, strong women'. This is contrasted with an image of partially-clothed women protesters, presented as unattractive with their short pink hair or shaved heads and sagging bodies and described as 'braindead, aggressive, misandrists'. The words 'Replacing dignity with depravity' reinforce nostalgic sentiments about quiet and subservient women of the past as compared with disgusting, trashy, modern feminists. When I asked Fred about this Post, he replied, 'the two pictures sum it up don't they [chuckles]. Yeah, absolutely ridiculous. How can anybody who's standing there expect people to want to support them, think they're intelligent, world leaders? (...) They look stupid'. Fred's comments hint at the depiction of those on the left as angry, irrational snowflakes and reveal disgust and contempt. There is an air of frustration and one of superiority to Posts like this, underlined by a 'world gone mad' narrative: if *only* young people could just see how ridiculous they are being; if only they were clever enough to see what 'we' see. However, Fred's comments also promote the notion that having rational or intelligent arguments was not enough (for feminism) without appealing to a respectable aesthetic to win over hearts as well as minds.

Figure 20: Image Shared by Fred



The above examples also highlight the way in which the multi-modal nature of social media content makes it particularly conducive to conveying and provoking emotion. Even without an image to Post, on Facebook one can now at the click of a button add a colourful patterned background to their text-based Status Update to make it visually striking, almost like an instant image generator. Static images with text overlay (often referred to as ‘memes’ (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019, p. 137; see 2.2) have the advantage of being quickly digestible emotional ‘sound-bites’ or ‘bite sized nuggets of political ideology and culture’ (DeCook, 2018, p. 485), and have been described as instrumental to ‘far-right’ and ‘alt-right’ cultures online (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019, p. 138; see also Miller-Idriss, 2019). However, in the current study, participants also Shared a large number of videos, as well as links to news and blog-type alternative news sites. When it comes to links to outside sites, simply copying and pasting the URL into a Post will prompt Facebook to automatically embed a ‘snapshot’ of the linked webpage, typically with the header image. This is endemic to the ‘economies of attention’ of which social media are a key part, and where provoking an emotional response from a user is more likely to generate ‘clicks’ (Cosentino, 2020, p. 21; Kalpokas, 2019, p. 5).

For videos, users need no longer Share links from external sites like YouTube – Facebook allows videos to be uploaded to and Shared directly from its own platform, or even recorded directly through the app and Shared in real-time (so-called ‘Facebook Live’). While videos, as Olivia noted above, have the advantage of being able to provide much more detailed information, as noted in 2.2.3, their real power is in their ability to use a combination of visual and oral stimulus to position the audience. Just as there is a plethora of alternative information sites and channels online, there is now also an immense abundance of right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist video content. These range from short clips of alternative commentators like Katie Hopkins or Avi Yemini speaking directly to the camera in an unrehearsed fashion that *feels* intimate and genuine and promotes trust, to longer (sometimes an hour or more) documentary-style videos meant to evoke horror or anxiety.

But, as discussed in 2.2.3, social media are not simply vessels for emotionally provocative content, but have become a ‘key site for the enactment of increasingly embodied politics’ (Overell & Nicholls, 2019a, p. 2) and promoting emotional connectivity. By understanding emotions as first-and-foremost relational constructs (Burkitt, 1997; Wetherell, 2013), we can see how networked platforms like social media can be important arenas for sharing and experiencing emotionality. As Burkitt (1997, pp. 40–41) explains, emotions like aggression do not emerge from within individuals, but rather are generated in relations between people.

Humour is a useful example of this, as previously demonstrated by Malmqvist (2015). ‘Alt-right’ (see 2.3.2) online spaces in particular are characterised by a culture of cynicism (Nagle, 2017) and the use of irony to attract new members (Greene, 2019). Humour was also prevalent in participants’ milieu and amusement was something they ‘got out of’ their political engagement. As Isaac said of watching parliament online, ‘I think it’s quite humorous as well, don’t get me wrong, (...) it is a lot of fun to watch’ (interview 2). Humour was important to Eileen in particular, and her scathing response to a critic in 6.3.2 is illustrative of the generally sarcastic tone she used when producing content. Alongside the informative nature of her self-authored Posts, her sense of humour was clearly one of the key sources of her popularity. As a well-known ‘blogger’ in the pro-Leave milieu, she was described by other participants as someone they liked because she was ‘funny’ or ‘witty’. She told me this was partly because ‘I like to have

fun’, but also to ‘keep them [her audience] entertained’. Alluded to here is the way in which humour is essentially something shared and plays a powerful role in community construction (McDonald, 2018, p. 28). Some of the content participants Shared on their Wall were simply apolitical jokes, but the use of humour in their milieu generally illustrated the way in which humour is often also utilised to exclude and to humiliate others (ibid, p. 28, 108).

Alongside humour, empathy is also a shared affective experience on social media (see 2.2.3). The content participants Shared contained many examples of this, including around insufficiently supported elderly, war veterans, crime victims, and in particular children – as victims of paedophilia, gender confusing education, or as future inheritors of a world ruined by diversity (see Figure 19 above). McDonald (2018, p. 52) calls this ‘distant suffering’, and notes the mediated way in which we are increasingly expected to experience and respond to such suffering. Audrey told me that the kind of content she liked to Share on Facebook was that related to things like ‘social care for the old people, people living o’t streets and kids (...) and soldiers (...) that have fought for country and they come back you know needing limbs and rehabilitation and things (...) just things you can support’ (interview 1). These causes were of course often linked to the kind of moral outrage described above, the means by which empathy was converted to an impetus to act. Society’s vulnerable – in the form of elderly, veterans and children – were particularly emotionally provocative topics perhaps because of this link between empathy and moral emotions, whereby acting to protect these groups created a sense of feeling good about doing the right thing (like that described by Asahina above) and delineated participants from political opponents who ‘didn’t care’.

Such empathy and moral outrage were also used to create solidarity and affinity with the kinds of transnational white collectivities discussed in 4.4. For instance, one of the popular topics in participants’ milieu during the fieldwork was that of the violent targeting of white farmers in South Africa and Christian farmers in Nigeria. For instance, Eileen Shared a series of Posts on this topic, including a seven-minute-long video by alt-right influencer Lauren Southern, an opinion piece from Australian broadcaster ABC News, and a text-based Post she had written herself intended as a template for her followers to email the Prime Minister:

Dear Prime Minister (...) you now totally ignore the plight of White South African farmers, being attacked, raped and killed.

You ignore religious genocide in Nigeria where Christians are being wiped out in massive numbers.

The media can't wait to show us the Rohingya Muslims being persecuted even though originally they were the aggressor in a foreign land after the people of Myanmar welcomed them in (Eileen's Facebook Wall)

All of this content is aimed at imploring Eileen's followers to 'get some emails sent' (ibid) and this is achieved by evoking empathy, guilt and fear ('Trouble is the apathetic British Public think it could never happen here...', ibid). By sharing in this empathy and outrage and taking action, users could draw boundaries not only between themselves and others who 'don't care', but also between those who deserve empathy (white Christians) and those who do not (aggressive Muslims).

Such emotional interactions with content and between users demonstrates the circularity of affect (Wetherell, 2012, p. 141) and the way in which 'reciprocal' emotions (Jasper, 1998) emerge between those who discursively share amusement, empathy, disgust etc. online. It also constitutes an 'affective-discursive loop' facilitated by social media (Wetherell, 2012, p. 141). That is, 'The rhetoric and narratives of unfairness, loss and infringement create and intensify the emotion. Bile rises and this then reinforces the rhetorical and narrative trajectory. It goes round and round' (ibid). As Kirk told me, 'unfortunately most of [the videos] are Muslim things, and you think to yourself, how barbaric, you know, and that's what turns you against them, (...) the more you see [such videos], the more it turns you against them' (interview 2).

This 'feeling' and subsequent 'doing' (Sharing content) in turn generates and solidifies feelings. Participating in these milieus online helps users to learn and normalise the community's 'feeling rules', and as discussed in 4.4, the conflict with opponents experienced in interactions online also works to solidify a sense of collective identity and moral solidarity (Asahina, 2019, pp. 130–134). In this sense, participants were not simply engaging with political information and political knowledge online. They were engaging in a practice of 'embodied meaning making' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 4), an 'embodied sociality' in which 'the ability to feel certain things makes it possible to

think certain things’ (McDonald, 2018, p. 15). This relationship between ‘thinking’ and ‘feeling’ is what I turn to now.

6.5.3 Rethinking the relationship between knowledge and emotion

The first three sections of this chapter outlined the way in which participants placed a high value on knowledge, constructed themselves as rational and objective truth-seekers, and used facts and figures as weapons in their battle to be taken seriously. However, as this final section has shown, interviews and observations in this study revealed the way in which participants’ engagement with political knowledge was in fact a highly affective experience.

This reflects the way in which emotions and judgement must be understood as interacting; as Raymond Williams (1977, p. 132) suggested, ‘not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought’. This is not a novel concept: it has always been difficult to escape the affective nature of politics in general and mediated politics in particular. Affective intelligence theory has already suggested that emotions like anxiety, anger and hope are key determinants of which information we choose to inform our decision-making (G. E. Marcus, 2003). In McDonald’s (2018, p. 166) words, ‘in order to be able to *believe* certain things, we have to be able to *feel* certain things’, and the way we experience the world is always both ‘sensuous-emotional’ and ‘intellectual’ (see also Asad, 2011). Emotions should be understood not as in direct contention with reason or rationality, but as constituting ‘a form of human reasoning’ (Mizen, 2015, p. 168), and are an integral part of how we make judgements about matters that affect ourselves and those we care about (A. Sayer, 2011). As Mizen (2015) has demonstrated in his study of the Occupy movement, emotions play a decisive role in evaluations of what ‘matters’, with complex and nuanced forms of emotional reasoning at play.

Emotions have always been a significant part of ideology, as the work of scholars like Hochschild (2016), Ahmed (2004) and Wetherell (2012) have demonstrated. Contrary to ‘post-truth claims’, emotional engagement with politics is nothing new. However, in participants’ case, feelings and knowledge were not simply equal, mutually interacting elements. Their narratives around factfulness were informed by feelings of marginalisation or othering within the perceived dominant regime of truth. Their desire

to stake a claim in knowledge production by challenging their marginalised position in that production was fundamentally a matter of pride.

However, a conflict existed between their negative depiction (condemning, dismissal) of emotions and emotionality, and their genuinely emotional engagement with the subject matter and the medium. Like the respondents in Moss and colleagues' (2020, p. 839) study, participants were eager to deny their emotionality because they had 'feelings about feelings' in political life. This was arguably in part due to an 'emotional regime' (Reddy, 2001) in which they were encouraged to understand emotions and thought as 'distinct and competing' (Moss et al., 2020, p. 837), and which 'both valorises individual feelings and maintains the belief that they are separate from, and inferior to, reason' (ibid, p. 852). This hierarchical and adversarial understanding of emotion and reason was reflected in popular narratives about the referendum which assumed that 'Leave was the emotional choice and Remain the rational one' (ibid, p. 840) and clearly contributed to participants' feelings of being 'othered'. It is also precisely the regime which generates the notion of 'post-truth' and gives it its currency.

6.6 Conclusion

As Moss et al. (2020, p. 840) note, 'One of the core assumptions in the public discourse of the referendum was that Leave was the emotional choice and Remain the rational one'. In the context of an emotional regime whereby emotions in politics are seen as dangerous and selfish (ibid, p. 839), it is no surprise that participants felt that, as Brexiteers, their knowledge claims were ridiculed and marginalised. If a sense of political disempowerment was related to the Leave vote (see 2.4.2), then it seems this was maintained and amplified in the polarising discourses after the referendum. At the same time, a vast array of alternative news sites with their own agendas became available to participants via social media and its algorithms (see Chapter 4), appealing to the idea that it was in fact those on the 'left' (of which Remainers were a part) who were hysterical snowflakes. Furthermore, on globally connected social media, participants learned they were not alone in their concerns, and their frustrations and anxieties reverberated in their interactions online.

This context meant participants experienced their political positions as marginalised or othered. They thus sought to challenge this representation of themselves and their views

as irrational and unworthy, and restore their value as citizens by staking their own claim to knowledge production. They did this by participating in challenges to the regime of truth around Brexit, migration and what was good for society, constructing themselves as highly rational and factual, and painting their political opponents as the opposite. It is to this end that, contrary to 'post-truth' claims, knowledge was in fact highly valued by participants. This knowledge was to be found not in formally accepted institutions like higher education or mainstream news media, but rather had to be sought and uncovered for oneself. Participants rejected 'left-wing' knowledge regimes and made alternative claims about society and the form it should take.

However, participants' self-narratives of rationality and objectivity can be contrasted with some of the obvious ways in which emotions played a part in their political engagement. Classic divisive emotions like disgust, hate and moral outrage were all common in interviews and Facebook Posts, but emotions like amusement and empathy were also evident. Participants were clearly affected by content they saw online. Their engagement activities could also be understood as having emotional consequences which then fed back into their engagement, in that Posting warnings and educating others online while delineating themselves from uncaring or morally 'bad' groups was a 'feel good' activity. Above all, their claims to knowledge in and of themselves reveal the importance of feelings of marginalisation and of course pride to participants.

Emotion and rationality are not mutually exclusive (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 166). Their contrast in the study of political motivations is, as Jasper (2011, p. 286) attests, 'untenable'. Nor have we ever been simply 'rational' beings. Such a positivist treatment of emotion is clearly at odds with the social theory of emotions (Moss et al., 2020, p. 841). Thus the 'post-truth' claim that rationality and expertise has been replaced by emotional appeals is dangerously misleading. Furthermore, in that emotion is integral to the way in which individuals on both sides of the political spectrum engage in politics, theories of 'post-truth' are also normatively loaded, creating hierarchies between emotions that are right and 'rational' and those that are wrong and 'irrational'. This only serves to add to the kinds of discontent which fuelled participants' political engagements. It is not that the appeal of contemporary right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist discourses is not emotional or that affect does not play a huge role in engagement with hateful ideologies both online and offline. However, the results of this

study reflect that our current political moment is perhaps more preoccupied with (determining and representing) ‘facts’ than ever; the ability to do one’s own research online and the array of alternative information sources on offer has rather engendered a battle of the facts. That is, while selection and presentation of, and faith in, facts will always be driven in part by emotion – including feelings about the extent to which these cohere with our pre-held values and prejudices – we have certainly not entered an era in which emotions are given precedence over facts.

These findings demonstrate the way that contemporary struggles over truth which are played out online and in the media more broadly are not mere ‘truth-games’ (Cosentino, 2020, p. 21) within a new flat hierarchy between ontologies (ibid, p. 19). To the actors involved they are in fact serious challenges to power, and thus have important political consequences within the ‘populist moment’. In participants’ lifeworld it was not new emotional and irrational challenges to accepted truths that were the problem. Rather, this view of their engagements was itself the problem, because it was one which rendered them and their claims devalued, demonised and ignored. Such findings also support the idea that “‘fact-checking’ has limited utility in public debates’ (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 361). As Ylä-Anttila asserts, ‘Instead of truth value alone, the social origins, meanings, and implications of knowledge claims are crucial’ (ibid).

7. Conclusion: ‘Facebook gives us an outlet for that’

The success of the Conservative Party in the 2019 General Election, with its emphasis on ‘getting Brexit done’, simultaneously highlighted the continuing significance of support for Britain’s departure from the European Union, and ongoing frustrations at the way the deadlock surrounding the issue had eclipsed other issues in British politics for three years prior (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020). Even in 2020, with media and public attention engulfed by an unprecedented global pandemic, the form and impact of this departure are as unclear as ever, and attention has turned once again to Facebook and other social media platforms’ role in the dissemination of misleading and falsified information and the propagation of harmful conspiracy theories (Depoux et al., 2020).

Despite this, there has been a surprising dearth of qualitative research into Brexit, its relationship with social media and Facebook in particular, and non-digital-natives’ political engagements on these platforms. In particular, there is a lack of prior research that focuses on users, takes their meaning-making and motivations seriously, combines lived experiences online and offline with perspectives on users’ engagement with media content, or investigates processes of encountering and interacting with, and becoming politically engaged around, right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist content online.

This project aimed to respond to this stark gap in qualitative sociological research into political social media use. It sought to understand how Facebook was used by ‘non-digital-native’ Brexit supporters in England and Wales to engage with pro-Leave and related right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist content, and the significance of this engagement to their social and political lives. In doing so it aimed to shed light on the complex nexus between the recent phenomenon of support for Brexit, long-standing discontents with ethnic and religious diversity and liberal social change, and the evolving role of social media platforms in politics. In particular, it set out to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How and why do non-digital-native pro-Leave Facebook users in England and Wales use social media to engage with politics?
- 2) How does this group’s social media use affect their political engagement?
- 3) How do these individuals make sense of their pro-Leave position online and offline?

4) What is the significance of truth claims and affect to these individuals' political engagement?

To answer these, I employed a novel multiple methods research design that combined semi-structured interviews with immersive online observations. Fifteen participants were recruited and consented to being observed, and each was interviewed once before and once after the observation period. In line with the interpretivist epistemology of the project, analysis focused on participants' narratives in the interviews, while observational data was used to contextualise these narratives.

The recruitment was limited to those who Shared Posts Publicly on Facebook, and thus the findings are not only not generalisable to all Leave supporters (many of whom may not use Facebook or social media) but are also limited to relatively passionate and intensely engaged pro-Leave Facebook users. Nevertheless, observations during the fieldwork suggested that this milieu was far from negligible in size. Some of the Pages participants Shared from enjoyed over 100,000 Followers, and perhaps dozens of well-followed 'bloggers' like Eileen devoted their time to generating content on the platform. It should also be noted that although an even gender distribution was achieved and a variety of classes represented, all of the participants were of white ethnicity, as no non-white users agreed to participate in the study. Although a minority in this space, individuals from non-white groups may well have had a unique experience within the highly racialised arena that is the pro-Leave online milieu, and prior research has shown that motivations for supporting Leave do tend to differ between white and ethnic minority groups (N. Martin et al., 2019). Similarly, all of the participants were cisgender, and it is very possible that transgender and gender non-binary pro-Leave Facebook users would have held quite different views about 'left-wing' social change and minority rights to those expressed by the participants.

Based on analysis of the data collected, I have argued in this thesis that behind participants' use of social media was a desire to redefine claims to political knowledge while also reclaiming their own status as valued and empowered citizens, which was experienced as lost within an increasingly cosmopolitan and liberal society. Throughout the thesis, participants' narratives have alluded to the way in which they felt dismissed, ignored, or treated as racist, wrong or irrelevant for supporting Brexit and other conservative causes, feeling as though they did not have 'a say' in the direction in which

society was going. Their political engagement online gave them a new means with which to respond to these characterisations of themselves, and to ‘take back control’, as the Leave campaign slogan went, of their political and social agency and ultimately their destiny and that of their society or perhaps the world. As Deborah said, ‘We want to be able to have our own sovereignty back, and Facebook gives us an outlet for that’ (interview 1). To recognise these feelings or experiences of marginalisation is not to legitimate the views or concerns of participants, which were at many times hateful, exclusionary or underpinned by racism. It is simply an attempt to understand the causes and meanings of these views and concerns, an essential precondition for beginning to resolve the intense rifts that exist in contemporary British society, with the ultimate aim of ameliorating their harmful outcomes. Failure to engage in such an attempt can only serve to further contribute to the sense of marginalisation or of being ignored that participants experienced, as well as to exclude the experiences of a substantial group from the objects of our social enquiry. In this thesis, I examined three separate but related elements that emerged from the data: participants’ practices on Facebook; their narratives about the ideologies they subscribed to; and their attitudes towards knowledge.

Examining participants’ use of Facebook and their narratives around these practices, the focus of Chapter 4, I found that the logic of the Facebook platform both afforded and encouraged participants to become politically engaged in ways that made them feel valuable and in control, in response to the aforementioned experiences of feeling devalued and disempowered. Elements of Facebook’s logic that contributed to this included its global connectivity, its algorithmically-driven automation, its culture of Sharing and of antagonism, and its role as an alternative news provider. However, the findings challenged techno-determinist understandings of social media use, and dualistic conceptions of users as either ‘dupes’ of disinformation or as entirely independent of their media consumption in their views and actions. Participants combined passive and active practices in their online political engagement, demonstrating the effects of the platform’s logic as well as the agency that this logic afforded them. Their often intense online engagement resulted from a combination of the opportunities provided by the Facebook platform, their lived sociopolitical context, existing discontents with social change, with the EU, and with traditional media.

In Chapter 5, a thematic analysis of the narratives employed by participants when accounting for their pro-Leave stances revealed that they avidly drew on narrative templates that were provided by the content in their online milieus, and interpreted these in light of their own lived experiences. While many recent studies have pronounced a ‘rise of populism’, and used events like the result of the EU referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US to exemplify this, the findings outlined here perhaps complicate the characterisation of Brexit as a purely populist phenomenon. Certainly the participants in this study employed narratives that shared absolutist understandings of power with populism, and their anti-EU and anti-(left-wing)establishment narratives at times undeniably exhibited anti-elitism (Mudde, 2004), or a distinction between the enemy as those in authority and the people as victims or oppressed underdogs (Laclau, 2005, p. 80). Furthermore, they essentialised the figure of ‘the people’, depicting ‘us’ as morally pure victims and designating representatives to act as people’s heroes. Their emphasis on democracy also represented a fundamentally populist conception of political representation and sovereignty, in which ‘the people’ is constructed as a homogenous and authentic category whose will (i.e. the referendum result) is assumed self-evident and must be directly implemented (Mudde, 2007; Stier et al., 2020). Certainly their political engagement on Facebook could be understood as an ‘anti-institutional outburst’ in response to a ‘crisis of representation’ in that they felt their political positions (and their selves) had been cast as illegitimate, and their populist construction of themselves as ‘the people’ was predicated on this (Laclau, 2005, p. 137).

However, clearly culturally racist, nativist and Islamophobic frames of entitlement and belonging were also at play, as was affective polarisation and resultant animosity towards Remainers and ‘lefties’. For many participants, Brexit was not their only concern, but rather could be described as crystallising a range of pre-existing discontents. These discontents had developed over many decades, and were in many instances the same ones that scholars of racism have been observing since the 1980s. Thus, these findings lend weight to claims that immigration and racism played a central role in the referendum result, and to Virdee and McGeever’s (2018, p. 1804) claim that the success of the Leave campaign rested on the way it ‘carefully activated long-standing racialized structures of feeling about immigration and national belonging’ or ‘a reservoir of latent racism’ (ibid, p. 1807). The findings also challenge those studies

which have framed Brexit as a problem of the ‘left behind’ working class. Participants, who represented a range of socioeconomic groups, were not simply ‘losers of globalisation’ who were responding to individual material or economic loss. They did view the nation as having suffered materially at the hands of the EU, and described what were to them tangible changes in their communities and their lives. However, what appeared most significant to them were cultural and value changes that resulted in a loss of symbolic position, within a society they perceived to be changing in destructive and detrimental ways.

The social consequences of the inability of society to resolve the rift between those who support minority rights and progressive social change and those who do not, and undoubtedly the effects of the way it has been mediated over the decades, have manifested in the intense affective polarisation that appears to exist in Britain today. The way in which participants’ representations of Remainers and ‘left-wingers’ were at times even more negative than those of migrants or Muslims, indicates that it was not simply participants’ (often hateful) views about ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, but also the condemnation of these views by others that shaped participants’ discontents and ultimately their lifeworld. With their legitimacy as citizens constantly challenged by what they saw as a ‘left-wing’ and pro-Remain hegemony in the media and politics, participants used their political engagement to ‘generate alternative ways of making value’ (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012), albeit ones that may only have had currency within their own milieus.

Furthermore, the metanarrative around which these narratives cohered was closely related to conspiracism, and in particular to far-right conspiracy theories around immigration. These theories and worldviews appealed to them because they are fundamentally theories of power and alternative knowledge. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, participants’ preoccupation with knowledge and uncovering hidden truths was part of staking their claim to knowledge by constructing themselves as its holders, in response to their perceived exclusion from its production. That participants were not generally conspiracy theorists per se, should in fact be treated as an alarming finding, as it is potentially a symptom of the increasing mainstreaming of these far-right, racist explanations of oppression. Whether or not social media use is contributing to the popularity of conspiracy theories is still under investigation (Douglas et al., 2019, pp.

12–13). However, the rising popularity, in Britain and globally, of particular anti-immigration conspiracy theories like New World Order and the Great Replacement, alongside the Trump-revering Q-Anon conspiracy, have clearly taken advantage of fertile ground provided by growing legitimacy of white supremacist thinking and hostility towards immigration (Cosentino, 2020; Davis, 2019). Declining trust in and satisfaction with institutions of authority and a burgeoning alternative news industry seeking to undermine these institutions may also be contributing to the availability of epistemic strategies used to propagate such theories (Shahsavari et al., 2020). It is clear that social media is providing the connectivity and audience base for the peculiar trans-nationalisation of nationalist claims, alongside the globalisation of anti-globalist claims, both of which serve to create a sense of shared victimhood that strengthen (white) nationalist and nativist attitudes. The combination of this with the availability of these ideas in easy-to-access and easy-to-relate to forms arguably created the conditions for participants to engage with conspiratorial and white supremacist narratives as useful explanations for their views and for the conditions in which they saw themselves as living.

Thus, these findings demonstrate that although populist discourses or populist worldviews may be relevant to support for Leave, particularly in online milieus, this support cannot necessarily be explained by relying on the concept of populism alone. Indeed, the rising popularity of populist-styled politicians in many countries in recent decades, culminating in the election of Donald Trump in the US in 2016, has seen the term ‘populism’ enter the popular vernacular, perhaps resulting in further blurring of its already contested definition (Rooduijn, 2019). The pejorative use of the term, as Laclau (2005) points out, is laden with normative assumptions about ‘crowds’ and ‘the people’ that have implications for the way we should understand ‘the ontological constitution of the political as such’ (ibid, p. 63). Participants’ desires to be ‘heard’ and to have a stake in politics, expressed and reflected in their social media practices and their political narratives, are at face value, democratic demands.

However, these demands cannot be understood outside of the political and ideological contexts, and social practices, through which they came into being and came to have meaning to participants. Using labels like ‘populist’, contested as they are, does little to help our understanding of the social conditions and motivations behind support for

Leave. To understand the referendum result and, perhaps more importantly, enduring and evolving support for Britain's exit from the EU, we must consider it in the context of the history of racism in British society, of the local and global discontent with immigration and social change, the mainstreaming of right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist sentiments, and the role of social media in and among these. Some of the concerns expressed by the participants in this study, may have been (perhaps temporarily) ameliorated in the general public by the referendum result (Schwartz et al., 2020), but just as they have existed long before the referendum, they will arguably exist long after the UK leaves the EU (M. Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). Negative responses to the Black Lives Matter campaign in Britain bring to the fore the continuingly contentious nature of the politics of race and identity, and demonstrate how far there is yet to go in promoting understanding of race-based disadvantage and the need for minority rights agendas (Pandey & Leslie, 2020).

The findings presented here also directly challenge 'post-truth' claims that a shift towards privileging emotions over facts is behind Brexit and other contemporary mediated right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist phenomena. I argue that it is erroneous to assume that the 'truth' no longer matters in the arena of contentious politics. Rather, participants' political engagements, as all three empirical chapters have demonstrated, revolved around truth-seeking and truth-sharing. To them, knowledge was power. Chapter 6 in particular demonstrates that the participants were extremely preoccupied with facts and demonstrating factfulness, in response to their experiences of being characterised as having taken the 'emotional' or 'irrational' decision for voting Leave. Like many movements and political communities, they worked within their own mutually constituted system of knowledge that served as an alternative to the perceived regime of truth around politics. However, their experiences of and narratives around social media use were also highly affective. This was not only around identification with a Leave position (cf. Browning, 2019, pp. 222–223), about which they were undoubtedly passionate. Emotions like anger, disgust, anxiety, empathy and amusement were fundamental to their engagement with all of the issues that mattered to them.

To sociologists of emotion, it is not novel to assert that emotions and rationality are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the dominant emotional regime that asserts that there is no place for emotion in the political arena (Moss et al., 2020, p. 837; Reddy, 2001) –

despite it being inextricable from politics and indeed potentially useful for it (Nussbaum, 2013) – underlies normative and value-laden claims of a ‘post-truth’ condition by political scientists, media scholars and philosophers. Moving beyond these sorts of sweeping existential claims is essential for understanding the true nature of support for right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist politics, and the human faces behind it. In addition to denying the fact that politics of all creeds is inherently emotional, the recent focus on facts versus emotions removes contemporary right-wing, right-wing populist and nativist phenomena from their context and their content. In doing so it obscures the importance of ideology, and in particular racist ideology, whose enduring and significant presence in society we can ill afford to ignore. This finding also has implications for anti-disinformation and media literacy agendas. Patronising approaches that seek to ‘educate’ those deemed misinformed are likely to exacerbate the kinds of resentments that were behind participants’ self-construction as truth holders.

On face value, participants’ online political engagement afforded them a sense of agency that brought a degree of energising value to their lives. However, the sense of power and agency that their practices on Facebook afforded them obfuscated where the real power lay. The presence in participants’ narratives and Facebook Posts of the far-right conspiracy theories mentioned above, often with age-old anti-Semitic roots, pointed to the potential that the politics of Brexit and the degree of legitimacy it has provided to anti-immigrant sentiments was being exploited by far- and extreme-right actors for dissemination of their ideologies to new audiences. Furthermore, the scandals around Cambridge Analytica and political advertising on social media more broadly (Risso, 2018) demonstrate how in the social media and big data analytics age, money can quite literally buy political support. As noted in Chapter 4, there was a lack of awareness among participants around the power of algorithmic targeting, which was in contrast with their extremely critical stances towards ‘mainstream media’, as well as their characterisations of Facebook as a biased platform. It is illuminating to understand this inconsistency as a result of them viewing their information discovery as *despite* control over information dissemination, rather than because of it. This view was related to their construction of themselves in opposition to what they perceived as a ‘left-wing’ bias in the media, in society, and crucially among those with power. Thus, it is possible that participants’ apparently highly critical attitude towards information consumption could in fact fuel rather than weaken the power of platforms like Facebook in the

political arena. Participants' political engagement practices also fell short of serious challenges to their purported oppression, which is reflected in their acceptance of right-wing populism that rejects left-wing conceptualisations of structural inequality.

This thesis has attempted to bring together sociopolitical context, individual practices and meaning-making, and social media arenas, in order to generate a more holistic understanding of contemporary mediated contentious politics. In doing so, I have intended to acknowledge the unique nature of the current conjuncture (Hall & Massey, 2010) between Brexit and political social media use, as well as the quotidian and banal aspects that underpin this. As noted in Chapter 4, participants' political views or stances generally did not undergo radical change as a result of their political engagement online, but their intense politicisation would arguably not have occurred, and their views not found the articulations they did, without the opportunities provided by both Brexit and Facebook. As Clarke and Newman (2017, p. 109) note, 'the Leave campaign found a political register in which the "dispossessed" could find themselves represented'. However, if Brexit provided the ideological opportunity for participants to find their voice, social media provided the technical opportunity, bringing a form of legitimacy to participants' knowledge and delivering it directly to their Newsfeed in the form of Likes, Shares, Followers, suggested Friends and suggested content. Both the politics of Brexit and the technology of social media have provided unprecedented arenas for discussing existing discontents with immigration and social change.

By one logic, being 'finally listened to' should ameliorate the resentment and claims of victimhood that fuel these discontents. Indeed, one recent study has found that feeling 'misunderstood' or 'not listened to' was positively correlated with support for Brexit (University of Exeter, 2020, although we should not necessarily infer a causal relationship here). However, this newfound legitimacy has had currency only within those factions of society that accept it as so, and has given rise to equally passionate delegitimising efforts by anti-racist sensibilities. Given the very real harm that can be caused by these right-wing populist and nativist ideologies – the most tragic evidence of which was provided by the Christchurch Massacre during the project fieldwork – challenges to these legitimacies are undoubtedly indispensable. However, participants' doubling-down reactions to being told they were 'stupid' or 'wrong' (Helen, interview

2) demonstrate that in this ‘culture war’ such challenges are not necessarily effective in engendering positive social change.

Now that Britain has left the EU and the transition period is coming to an end, future studies are tasked with investigating how (or indeed whether) this milieu continues to develop. In particular, the announcement by Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party of their intention to rebrand themselves as the anti-lockdown ‘Reform UK’ (Sabbagh & Parveen, 2020) prompts questions about the relationship between the kinds of sentiments, experiences and practices behind support for Leave examined in this thesis, and responses to the ongoing global pandemic. Furthermore, the effects on these mobilisations of tightened regulations around ‘disinformation’ now being imposed by a number of major social media platforms warrants close examination going forward.

I would like to end this thesis by highlighting the urgency of further close-up, qualitative research into contentious politics and their intersection with social media. Behavioural traces on social media cannot be treated as a reflection of social reality. In fact, if this study had focused its analysis on the content that participants Shared, which was generally far more angry, hateful and violent than the views, concerns and interpretations shared in interviews, the conclusions of this thesis would likely be extremely different. I invite future studies to adapt the method employed here to investigate other groups and contexts. Sociological research that focuses on the experiences and meaning-making of individuals has the potential to generate understandings that will be invaluable in mapping the path to reconciliation in divided societies.

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Appendix 1: Technical glossary

Comment	<i>Noun:</i> A piece of text a user leaves in response to a Post <i>Verb:</i> To leave a Comment in response to a Post
Follow	To express an interest in a Page, resulting in content from this page appearing in one's Newsfeed
Friend	A user who one is connected with on Facebook; this is a mutual relationship
Group	A community of users, which can be Public (anyone can join), Private (approval is required to join), or Secret (not searchable and only visible to those who are invited by the administrator); users Share content with each other here
Like	To react to a Post or Page with a 'thumbs up' sign; generally a sign of agreement, approval or support
Messenger	Available as part of the Facebook platform website and as a separate mobile app, this is a tool used to send Private Messages
Newsfeed	A user's homepage, where the content algorithmically tailored to them is displayed; this content may come from the Walls of Friends, Pages or Groups one Follows or Likes, or may be suggested content (including advertisements); as the user scrolls down the page, more content is generated
Page	A section dedicated to an interest, topic, or individual; users can Post to and Share from a Page if this feature is enabled
Post	<i>Noun:</i> A piece of content that a user Shares <i>Verb:</i> To Share a Post
Private	Visible only to one's Friends, or a subset of these
Private Message	A user-to-user message sent via the Messenger function of Facebook
Profile	A user account, or the details (relationship details, photographs etc.) attached to an account that are visible Publicly or Privately
Public	Visible to anyone with a Facebook account
Share	To make a Post visible, either Publicly or Privately; this can be done on one's own Wall, on a Page, Group, or the Wall of a Friend; one can Share content they have created, content from external websites, or content from Friends, Pages or Groups, if this feature is enabled
UnFriend	To remove a user from one's Friends list
Wall	Also known as a Timeline, the Posts a user Shares here are displayed in reverse chronological order

Appendix 2: List of Facebook Pages used in recruitment

Block the EU Brexit Payment
Breaking Brexit News
Britain Bites Back
Britain Patriots
British Freedom of Speech News
British Nationalists
British Voice
Change Britain
Fight4Brexit
Fighting for Britain
Fighting for Britain III
For Britain – North West
Free Tommy Robinson
Get Britain Out
I'm voting UKIP in the next election
Leave.EU
Leave Means Leave
Political News UK
Pro United Kingdom-Anti EU
Proactive Patriots
Sadiq Khan Watch
Save Britain Now
Save England for the English
Stop the EU
The Brexiteers
This is England Forever
UK Unity
Unity News Network
We are the 52%

Appendix 3: Interview schedules

Interview 1

- About you:
 - o In which age range are you? E.g. 30s, 40s, 50s etc.
 - o Whereabouts do you live now? How long have you lived there? Where did you grow up?
 - o Do you work? What do/did you do?
- What kinds of social media do you use? (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Reddit)
- How often do you use social media?
- Are there moments when you use it more than others?
- When did you start using social media?
 - o Why? How did this come about?
- What devices do you use to access social media? (e.g. smartphone, desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet)
 - o Where do you do this and how often? (e.g. at home, at work, out and about)
- What do you do most on social media? (e.g. find current affairs information, stay in touch with friends/family, find entertainment (funny videos etc.), Post/disseminate information, organise events, find information about events)
- What is it about using Facebook that appeals to you?
- Are you a member of any Groups on Facebook?
- How do you decide what to Follow/Like etc?
- Has the way you use social media changed since you started using it?
 - o E.g. what you spend the most time doing on it
 - o E.g. who you interact with on it
 - o E.g. how much time you spend on it
- How has your use of media more generally changed?
- What other sources are influential in shaping your understanding of news/politics?
- Who do you interact with on social media and why?
 - o Whose Posts do you Like or Comment on?
 - o Who do you send Private Messages to?
 - o What relationship are these people to you? (e.g. already knew them offline from work, friendship group, family; met online)
 - o Are there certain people you do not/will not interact with on social media? If so, why?
- Do you think some topics are perceived as more controversial than others? What kinds?
- There is a lot of controversy over freedom of speech and what opinions/information should and should not be allowed to be Shared on Facebook. What do you think about this?
 - o What should or should not be allowed?

- Have you ever been unsure about Posting something?
- Have you ever regretted Posting something?
- What are your views on social media?
 - What kind of impact do you think it has had on society?
 - What kind of impact do you think it has had on politics?
 - What kind of impact do you think it has had on you?
- Do you always know where Posts that you Share/Comment on have originated from?
- When Post content is from other websites or platforms, do you sometimes visit and read these?
- Have there been any particular events (e.g. political events) that you have used social media to engage with?
- Do you get into discussions with contacts on social media about politics or controversial topics?
 - Have these been public or private? (i.e. on a Page/Wall vs in a Private Message or Private Group)
 - What sort of topics?
 - What were the content and outcome of these discussions?
- Have your views on political issues changed or evolved since using social media? If so, in what ways?
- How is Brexit discussed in your circles? (on/offline)
- Do you interact with people from your local area on Facebook or use it to discuss local issues?
 - Has using Facebook changed how you feel about/towards your local area?
- How does your social media activity or the content you produce/circulate/consume on social media affect your relationships or activity outside of social media?
 - Do you discuss social media use with your friends/family/colleagues offline? (Any examples of this?)
 - Do you discuss information you've found through social media/online with people offline? (Examples?)
 - Did this affect you in any way?/How did you feel about this?
 - Has anything you've seen online prompted you to take any kind of action offline? (E.g. attending or organising a protest/demonstration, contacting your MP etc.) If so, tell me about this.
 - Has anything you've Posted on social media ever had consequences for you offline, or do you ever worry that it will? (E.g. with employment, being trolled, doxed, damaging friendships/family relationships etc.)
- Have you ever been banned from a social media platform, or do you know someone who has?
 - Why did this happen?
 - Do you think it was justified?
 - What do you think would justify a ban?

- Have you ever had negative or abusive comments posted on your wall or in reaction to something you have posted?
 - o What was this about?
 - o How did you react to this, and what was the outcome?

Interview 2

NB: These basic questions were tailored for each individual participant, including adding questions about specific sources, content, and topical issues.

- How have you been since our last chat?
- Can you tell me 2 or 3 issues or events that have particularly taken your interest on Facebook since we last spoke?
 - o How did these get your attention?/How did you learn about them?
 - o In what way are/were these important to you?
- I noticed you Share a lot of Posts from x.
 - o What is it about these Posts that makes you want to Share them?
 - o What is your relationship to this user?/What does this Page/Group mean to you?
 - o Do you always trust their content?
- People like x are quite popular among those talking about these issues. Why do you think this is? What is it about them that appeal to you?
- Who would you say would be your go-to source if you had to pick one? Why?
 - o If there are any you wouldn't trust, why is this?
- What about some of the blogs/news sites you share from, e.g. x
 - o Do you look ever go to check those websites directly?
 - o Do you always trust what they report?
 - o What do(n't) you like about them?
- Have you had any altercations on Facebook since we last spoke (e.g. opposing comments, abusive messages)? Tell me about what happened?
- There's been a lot of talk around a generational divide in politics these days - do you discuss politics with your daughter/kids? Are you friends on FB?
- Have you attended any events or protests etc. linked to the issues you share about/read about on Facebook since we last spoke?
 - o Why or why not?
 - o If so, how was it?
- You said that you've met a few people through Facebook, maybe people who have similar political views to yourself. I've seen a lot of Brexit-related and patriotic Pages and Groups on Facebook, and was wondering how you would feel about being described as a member of this 'community'?
 - o Do you think that this 'community' or interest group has been making an impact on politics, through the things they share on social media?
- In recent months, a number of high profile people have been banned from Facebook and other social media platforms. Some people are concerned that

Facebook will censor their views more and more. What do you think you would do if you could no longer find and share information on Facebook? Have you ever considered using another platform?

- UKIP is still the major party promoting a hard Brexit.
 - o What do you think of them? Have you ever considered becoming a member?
- Tell me about what you did on Facebook yesterday, e.g. how long spent doing what at what time of day and what interesting things may have come up. Which account did you use and why?
- Do you mind showing me a Post you shared today or yesterday?
 - o Where did you find this (e.g. in your Newsfeed, on a website, from a Page or Group)?
 - o What made you share this Post? Why is it important to you?
 - o Who did you hope would see it?
 - o Did you worry about it being controversial/the reaction to it?
 - o How do you feel about the reaction it did receive?
 - o Is it related to anything else you've Shared lately? How so?
- Do you mind showing me a Post you saw today or yesterday that took your interest but that you didn't Share?
 - o Where did you find this (e.g. in your Newsfeed, on a website, from a Page or Group)?
 - o Why didn't you Share it?
- I'm going to show you a couple of Posts that you Shared since we last spoke. For each Post, could you tell me why you thought it was Share-worthy/why it was important to you? Is it still as important to you now?
- As this project is about political content on Facebook and now is a particularly tumultuous time in British politics, could you tell me, after everything that's happened during the Brexit negotiations, who do you think you would like to see running the country?
- Has participating in this project made you think any differently about your social media use?
- This project has focused on people sharing their support for Brexit on Facebook. What do you think about the outlook for Brexit going forward?