

# 'Institutions of governance are all corrupted': anti-political collective identity of anti-lockdown protesters in digital and physical spaces

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## ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, loosely affiliated protesters came together around the slogan 'freedom' in the online and physical places of anti-lockdown protests. These protesters held shared grievances against official health advice and social distancing measures. Although the slogan freedom emotionally validated protesters, they articulated a diverse set of interrelated motivations, identifications, and beliefs with this slogan. This paper studies the ways the collective identity of the anti-lockdown protests in the UK was formed, relying on 33 go-along interviews and ethnographic observations in London anti-lockdown protests. The findings, first, show that protesters came together around an anti-political identity, which reflected a larger political alienation from the political system. Their strong emotions of anger and resentment towards official health advice and social distancing measures and their distrust towards elites, political institutions, and mainstream media created a shared sense of 'we-ness'. Second, the paper uncovers how the feeling of solidarity amongst protesters in London did not only originate from online platforms despite the increase in Internet use during the pandemic, but it was also materialized in local neighbourhoods, which fed larger anti-lockdown protests in physical spaces and online publics.

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## 1. Introduction

Anger and resentment towards social distancing measures and health advice during the COVID-19 pandemic brought together different interest groups and communities on social media platforms and in protest rallies around the slogan 'freedom'. This article focuses on the collective identity formation in anti-lockdown protests in London, which

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have been called ‘unite for freedom’ protests by the protesters (Reuters, 2021).<sup>1</sup> ‘Freedom’ has long been pronounced by radical right-wing populist parties who called for a revival of radical liberalism and aimed for a drastic curtailing of the role of the state (Betz, 1993, 418). The slogan ‘freedom’ has also been frequently pronounced in the tweets of right-wing populist politicians such as Trump during the pandemic. This slogan in the anti-lockdown protests embraces a negative understanding of freedom, as in ‘freedom from obstacles’ or ‘freedom from top-down interference’ of elites and institutions (see Larmore, 2003; Shnayderman, 2012), encouraging the emergence of protest rallies in major cities on a global scale in 2020 and 2021.

During the first lockdown in April 2020, anti-lockdown protests in the UK started in central London, particularly in Hyde Park and BBC headquarters, but spread across the country soon after. Protesters accused the UK government of using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to expand its power and restrict the personal freedoms of its citizens. They defined themselves against not only enforced lockdowns but also other pandemic-related restrictions introduced by the government, such as mask and vaccine mandates, restrictions to attending ceremonies and other socio-economic restrictions, including business closures (Kowalewski, 2021).

This article shows that collective identity in anti-lockdown protests in London was based on the wider anti-political context in the UK and common grievances of communities against social distancing measures during the pandemic, which, we argue, mainly originated from growing citizen distrust towards political institutions and establishment. Distrust can be explained as a suspicious or cynical attitude towards others (Lenard, 2008), reflecting real and/or perceived shortcomings in the set-up, functioning, and producing outputs of a political system or law (Bertsou, 2019). The paper accounts for the ways in which increasing distrust towards elites, political parties, and media institutions fed the collective identity of anti-lockdown protesters.

We argue that anti-lockdown protests did not spring from the virtual tabula rasa but originated from a specific set of patterned relationships between subcultural protester interaction on social media platforms (e.g. mutual sharing of and commenting on the slogan ‘freedom’ and misinformation sources on the pandemic), local social networks (e.g. small park gatherings), common grievances against perceived mainstream media framing (e.g. the coverage of the anti-lockdown protests), and distrust towards the official advice from the government (e.g. the disappearance of herd immunity discussions) (Flesher Fominaya & Gillan, 2017).

Our findings draw on go-along interviews with the anti-lockdown protesters and ethnographic observations in the sites of London protests. Using ethnographic approaches enabled us to explore to what extent the protesters created ties in both online and offline spaces, and what roles the existing political system, institutions, and media platforms played in forming these bonds. The paper thus asks three interrelated research questions:

- (1) How did the collective identity form in the anti-lockdown protests in London?
- (2) In what ways did the political identifications, motivations, and values of the protesters in London play a role in the formation of anti-lockdown collective identity?

- (3) To what extent did the protesters communicate and interact with each other online and/or in the local and wider physical space of the protests and thus formed the links of solidarity and affective bonds underpinning collective identity formation?

The ensuing sections present our theoretical perspective and methodology for studying the formation of collective identity, followed by three analysis sections addressing different facets of collective identity in anti-lockdown protests.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. *Collective identity in the digitally supported protests*

The concept of collective identity first gained traction in the 1970s, with Alberto Melucci (1995), who defined collective identity as a process of forming a ‘we’, where individuals feel like they are part of a group. The collective identity process has three critical components: 1) Movement actors construct shared beliefs, values, and definitions about the ends, means, and field of action (e.g. protest practices) (Klandermans, 2014). 2) They activate relationships by interacting, communicating, and influencing each other. 3) They make emotional investments and build solidarity links amongst them, creating the feeling of support (Goodwin et al., 2001). The interaction amongst protesters thus drives affect, which is a variation in a mind/body state and the sense-making process of human bodies that trigger emotions (Papacharissi, 2015). Different dimensions of affect, such as anger, outrage, and indignation serve as the driving factors for the articulation of oppression, social conflict, and shared grievances, contributing to the collective identity formation and becoming central to the politics of community in social movements (see Petrini & Wettergren, 2022, Stephens et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2021).

Early studies on digitally supported protests, such as Bennett and Segerberg (2013), often assumed that the shared nature of collective identity was absent in contemporary mobilisations. In this view, protesters did not necessarily come together around shared aims/ends or ideological identification. They rather mobilized around personalized hopes, grievances, and lifestyles (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and did not necessarily identify with the same principles and values in joining the same protest communities. Scholars rather drew attention to the personalized identities and diverse personal issues protesters articulate under the same user-generated slogans and visual symbols on the Internet (see Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Olesen, 2004).

However, in autonomous movements, which are composed of people from different ideologies, ‘collective identity is deliberately defined in an elastic and pluralistic manner’ (Fominaya, 2010, p. 379). The absence of a common ideology does not always reflect a lack of collective identity in a social movement. Collective identity appears as a dynamic and ongoing process and could be established around common issues rather than common ideologies over time (Melucci, 1995). More recently, scholars working on collective identity formation in digitally supported movements have examined how direct communication, images, symbols, and slogans used on social media platforms play a facilitator role in creating a collective sense of self (see Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Khazraee & Novak, 2018; Milan, 2015; Poell & van Dijck, 2018). Protesters with diverse

backgrounds and interests converged around specific goals and showed their identification with a group using specific symbols and the affordances of social media, such as adapting the symbols of the group as their profile pictures (see Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). The emotions and relations brought to life on social media platforms reconstruct the individual identity of protesters, which is composed of the total of collective identities that a person holds (Friedman & McAdam, 1992). Hence, the social media profiles, groups, and pages give voice and visibility to personalized yet collective and universal narratives.

Another strand of research on contemporary protests concentrates on physical protest spaces, such as local towns and neighbourhoods, which play a major role in collective identity formation and contestation (see Wulf et al., 2013; Charrad & Reith, 2019; Yuen, 2018). For example, in Tunisian protests solidarity networks started in local areas in impoverished and marginalized regions with limited access to the Internet (Charrad & Reith, 2019). This paper points to the perpetual importance of looking both at close-tied relationships (e.g. friendships) within local areas and the emotional processes of collective identity formation in protest movements on online and physical spaces.

## **2.2. *Anti-politics in anti-lockdown protests***

A crucial factor feeding the collective identity of anti-lockdown protesters in online and physical spaces was their anti-political attitudes and actions. Anti-politics consists of critical discussions, attitudes, and actions of different individuals against prevalent political actors and institutions, who are perceived to be corrupt, untrustworthy, inefficient, parasitic, incapable, and disconnected from people's needs. They are seen to concentrate only on gaining and maintaining political power (see Mete, 2010; Copland, 2020). Anti-politics thus implies public disengagement from politics, manifested in declining public participation in and even hostility to elections, political parties, and political system and acquiescence to dominant paradigms of public policy (see Fawcett et al., 2017; Humphrys, 2018). This can be viewed as an outcome of the breakdown of the political order prevailing in the advanced capitalist societies in the last century (Humphrys, 2018).

In the UK, the decline in the standards of living, austerity, and a decreasing level of social protection in workers' rights, due primarily to Thatcherite neoliberalism, were the main issues behind rising anti-political attitudes (Flinders, 2018). Indifference to politics and politicians in Britain was compounded with the new rhetoric by politicians. For instance, when Tony Blair's government allowed unfettered access to the UK for citizens of eight new EU accession countries in 2004, the rhetoric of right-wing populist parties such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) towards immigrants fuelled anti-political sentiments (Levy et al., 2016). Thus, before the MP's expenses scandal broke in 2009, commentators were already referring to Britain as having the deepest divide between the political class and the great majority of British people (Akkerman et al., 2014). Anti-political attitudes were crucial factors in leading to the Brexit vote too. The vote Leave campaign was organized around resentment at past losses and scepticism about promised futures (Finlayson, 2017 quoted in Flinders, 2018). Social groups who voted for Brexit came together around a sense of marginalisation, insecurity, and frustration and felt that mainstream politics had abandoned them, which also paved the way for anti-lockdown protests.

Distrust towards traditional media has also been building for a while, with less than half of the British public believing that the BBC journalists are honest and impartial (Ibbetson, 2019). Some British journalists were accused of accepting assertions without evidence during the EU referendum in 2016 (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018). After the 2019 general elections in Britain, BBC was also accused of being biased towards Conservative sources by uncritically repeating their output (Waterson, 2019). Furthermore, the disillusionment with media and government is a result of the postweb 2.0 ‘always on’ cultures and the rise of post-truth regimes, where the campaigns of resource-rich elites, such as Trump, have used big data analytics and strategic communication to influence social media users and utilized audience data for their own advantages (Harsin, 2015). Social media thus provides an ideal opportunity and amenable space to channel populist themes such as ‘emphasising the sovereignty of the people’, ‘advocating for the people’, ‘attacking the elites’, and ‘ostracising the others’ (see Gerbaudo, 2018; Gründl, 2022; Dinc & Ozduzen, 2023).

### 3. Methodology

This study was conducted as a pilot study exploring the collective identity of anti-lockdown protesters in the UK. We conducted fieldwork in six anti-lockdown protests in London over a year throughout 2021 and 2022 (20 March–24 April–9 May–5 June–18 December 2021 to 22 January 2022) and carried out 33 semi-structured interviews with anti-lockdown protesters in three protests in London. We observed the first three protests from start to end to gain ethnographic familiarity with the field site. We arrived at Hyde Park earlier than protesters to observe the ways protesters gathered, formed groups, and communicated with one another. During these three initial field trips to the protest sites, we adopted a multi-sited ethnographic approach, and we moved from Hyde Park to other sites, such as Oxford Street with the protesters. During these initial park gatherings and ensuing marches, we focused on the group interactions that made up the group culture and took field notes (Fine, 2020). The slow accumulation of understanding in our ethnographic research relied on our commitment to build and negotiate relationships with fellow human beings (Walsh et al., 2023).

On our fourth field trip to the anti-lockdown protest sites in London, we were confident and familiar enough with the protest movement and the field sites to start our interviews. In each field trip from the fourth to sixth visits, we interviewed protesters in various protest sites prior to, during and right after the protests. The 33 interviewees, who came from different backgrounds and cities in the UK, were between the ages of 19 to 66. They worked in a variety of professions from construction to engineering, creative sectors to teaching. We used go-along interviews, which is the general practice of ‘hanging out’ with participants when they engaged in natural activities within the protest movement, such as walking, chanting, and marching. Go-alongs are informal forms of urban ethnography, providing advantages over off-location interviews or unattached observations (Kusenbach, 2003, pp. 477–478). Go-alongs have been previously used to generate place-bound narratives (Bergeron et al., 2014), by observing people’s neighbourhood environments and studying people’s perceptions, processing, and navigation of their environments (Carpiano, 2009).

Go-alongs helped us understand the verbal, material, affective, and kinetic aspects of social interaction between interviewees, the researchers, and their social and political interactions (Jørgensen, 2016). In particular, go-alongs enabled us to uncover protesters' social interaction with governmental and media institutions in the UK, such as the Parliament and the BBC, where they chanted slogans against the mainstream media and politicians. Hence, the use of go-alongs in protests helped us not only to understand protesters' emotions towards institutions but also their relationships with one another and us as the researchers, their roles within the protest movement and their mobility across different phases and events of the protests.

Go-alongs are participatory and interactive research methods (Thompson and Reynolds, 2019), which also created tension for us as researchers. For example, we approached many protesters, but not all of them accepted to be interviewed and one interviewee did not allow us to audio-record the interview. We argue that this might be related to the protesters' general distrust towards scientists and institutions, such as the university. After all, we approached research participants by pronouncing outright our titles and university affiliations for ethical purposes. However, we generally gained their trust through dialogue and shared spaces and walking.

The duration of the audio-taped go-along interviews lasted between 8 and 33 minutes with an average of 23 minutes. These audio-taped interviews were complemented with informal talks with protesters (e.g. non-audio-recorded). This meant that we registered these conversations as field notes and did not count them within the duration of the audio-taped interviews. The 2 out of 33 interviews that lasted between 8 and 9 minutes were interrupted by the dynamics of the walk, the traffic noise or an ad-hoc event during demonstrations, such as a police intervention. As we were still able to ask most of our questions to these research participants in 8 minutes, we recorded and kept them in our interview sample.

During the semi-structured interviews, to understand the political identities of protesters, we asked them about their motivations and aims to join the protests, their electoral voting practices, their past protest experiences, and their reflection on how these experiences have/have not informed their participation in and engagement with the anti-lockdown protests. To examine the solidarity links and shared collective values between the protesters, we asked them if they felt close to other protesters and whether they made friends or acquaintances with other protesters in online or physical protest sites. To study the roles of media platforms in the formation of collective identity, we asked the participants how they heard about the protests, the type of information sources that they engaged with about the protests and the pandemic, whether they felt an affinity with these sources and whether they joined the protests with the people that they met on social media platforms. We transcribed the interviews ourselves and thematically coded the data for analysis. We used pseudonyms to protect participants' identities and did not reveal any identifying information of the interviewees, such as their age and occupation.

## **4. Findings**

### ***4.1. Anti-political identity of the anti-lockdown protesters***

Studying collective identity formation in autonomous groups in a social movement poses a challenge, as these groups are composed of different political identities, issues, and

frames (see Fominaya, 2010). Our observations of protesters' banners, protest talks, and go-along interviews showed that anti-lockdown protesters consisted of heterogeneous groups with different political identifications, values, and beliefs. From being a keen supporter of Brexit and UKIP to having supported left-leaning groups in the Labour Party or having voted for Liberal Democrats, protesters expressed different political identifications during our interviews. Protest spaces were also full of signs and symbols portraying these factional identities of protesters. While some protesters held up the Union Jack flag, others waved the flag of England or the flag of Palestine.

However, we also identified collective goals and identity within the protest movement. The protesters unified around the desire to support politicians, who were perceived to be 'for the people'. For instance, when asked about the political party that they voted for in the last elections and their past protest participation, similar to many other participants Darren identified the candidate they voted for as a politician 'for the people':

I've been coming to the [Freedom] protests probably since they first started and I used to go to the Brexit protests, that's it! I have been in most of them [Brexit protests]. I vote for the London mayor elections, but I didn't vote for Khan [laughs]. I voted for David Kurten, he is a London assembly member. He actually came on Sunday for marches. You know you can go and speak to him all the time'.

While some of our interviewees identified Jeremy Corbyn as a politician who is 'for the people', Darren defined the far-right politician David Kurten<sup>2</sup> as accessible, available, and down-to-earth. Darren viewed the other political elites as self-interested and corrupt, who operate behind the scenes, wishing to control the population. As such, anti-lockdown meaning-making reflects some tenets of populism, particularly the populist divide between the 'true people' and the 'evil elites' (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Despite the general sense of distrust towards the political elite and the political mainstream, three participants such as Darren also reported that they supported the recent anti-immigration campaigns of the Conservative Party (e.g. Brexit). Some of our participants' previous experience of joining the pro-Brexit protests also accounts for the participation of extreme right-wing groups and individuals in the anti-lockdown protests.

Although the political identities of these protesters were much more salient, instead of identifying with a political party, the protesters rather came together around ideas, ideologies, and communities of various other similar mobilisations before, such as the right-libertarian movements. These movements are based on the idea that individual liberty should be the defining principle of how society is organized, that government exists to protect individual rights (e.g. advocating low taxes), and that the needs of one person or group should not impose a moral duty on another (Chalmers et al., 2022).

The protesters' shared identity was also based on the idea that the current system was 'rigged' and that they did not trust the political elite and institutions. The banners, signs, songs, and slogans in the protests mirrored the overarching themes of freedom, 'waking up to the truth', and urging for resistance to perceived illegitimate forms of government control over the people. Protesters depicted their movement as organized by the people themselves, thus representing the '99%'. This reflects the political divide that is representative of populist logic (Laclau, 2005). Similar to other populist movements, we observed that anti-lockdown protesters were politically alienated and adopted an anti-political stand. Most of our

participants reported that they did not intend to vote anymore, because they believed that all politicians were essentially the same (Akkerman et al., 2014). For instance, David said:

‘Of course I don’t [vote]. Political parties are in the same machine . . . Banking and the whole system is rigged. They artificially create affiliation’.

Helen similarly recounted:

‘I feel really disillusioned by politics. It is the self-serving politicians that we have seen throughout this entire year of elites’.

Although from the outset the political distrust here could be seen as a result of anger towards pandemic related restrictions, we argue that anti-lockdown protesters’ distrust towards existing national political parties and policies reflects a more substantial displeasure with the political system (Avery, 2009), revealing and bolstering the anti-political collective identity in the protest movement.

#### **4.2. Local social ties, friendships, and the anti-lockdown collective identity**

Collective identity is also about the relationship of trust (Della Porta & Diani, 2006) and the formation of solidarity links amongst social actors (Hirsch, 1986). Similar to previous protest movements such as the Occupy Mongkok protests in Hong Kong (Yuen, 2018), solidarity bonds amongst a heterogeneous group of anti-lockdown protesters with different political identifications are primarily formed through direct political action in public gatherings in the parks and during protest marches, rather than ‘weak ties formed’ on the Internet (see Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Investigating the relationship of protesters with the organizers and fellow protesters, we found that our interviewees heard about the protests from ‘social media’ (e.g. Telegram channels) or ‘friends and social media’ (e.g. close friends and YouTube). However, they often could not provide us with the names of dedicated social media accounts that organized the anti-lockdown protests in the UK. These accounts are still crucial as they are often the primary sources of the opinion leaders whom protesters followed to obtain information or enjoy strong affective ties with (see Krinsky and Crosley, 2014). As such, the organizers might have prepared the ground for mobilisation through these pages, profiles and channels. However, the practices and experience of our interviewees showed that protesters have not yet created connectedness and a relationship of trust with these accounts.

Except for one participant, our interviewees reported that they either attended the protests with their local networks, especially friends and relatives that they already trusted and had strong ties with, or that they came alone. Social movement studies have long emphasized the crucial role of affinity groups in the mobilisation of and collective identity formation in protests (see Tilly, 2005). Pre-existing ties and social networks amongst affinity groups are sources of interpersonal trust, which play an important role in collective identity formation (Diani, 2000). During the anti-lockdown protests in London, we also observed that affinity groups were rooted in close friends, families, and geographically proximate communities whose already existing interactions helped to create personal trust and formed the first layer of the collective identity of the group.



Hence, our interviewees did not join the protests with users they met on social media platforms, and they often did not make any friends during the protests. For instance, when we asked if they made any new friends in the protests, Florian said:

I don't make friends, you just marched together and you know they're on the same page, but you don't really ask what's your name, where you live?

Similarly, Kate recounted:

'Usually I just come here with my group and then that is it really'.

Our observations in the protest sites were also in line with these statements of Florian and Kate. For instance, the moment we arrived in Hyde Park from the East of the Park on the 24th of April 2021, there were crowds sitting on the floor everywhere, some of them drinking beer or coffee. Most of these protesters came in groups, although there were also alone males standing or sitting on their own. These groups didn't interact with each other and preferred to stay in their own circles while waiting for the protests to start. The Egyptian protests in 2011 showed that the protesters can create strong bonds with others through social media platforms, but these bonds are formed over the years rather than in a short period of time (Herrera, 2014). Our interviewees had not yet created any strong bonds with other protesters through social media communication that rested on digital deliberation and/or the Internet's use as a direct civic tool (see Wisniewski, 2013; Chambers and Gastil, 2021), primarily because at the time of data collection the anti-lockdown social movement was a newly formed movement. We argue that the anti-lockdown protest communication on social media rather represented extemporaneous online communication, which means that social media platforms were primarily used by our interviewees as a tool for receiving the time and location of the protests shared at the last minute.

Some of our interviewees also reported that they depended on their socially trusted sources, such as their close friends (Hacıyakupoglu & Zhang, 2015), not only to physically participate in the protest space but also to obtain protest and pandemic-related information. Kate, for instance, recounted that they used 'their own bubble' instead of social media platforms to learn about these protests. Similar to 2011 protests in Tunisia and Egypt (Charrad & Reith, 2019; Ozgul Aslan, 2020), the first solidarity networks for our interviewees were rather built in local areas. Alex, for instance, explained this process:

We met all this group in our local area [showing people around them]. We have lots of [anti-lockdown] movements in each local area. Stand in the park UK, we meet every Sunday and our movement is growing. We started as six people and I think last Sunday we were 60 and that's in four weeks . . . We're just growing our local community. . . It is important not to feel alone in how you feel . . . Stand in the park UK is actually a global movement, it started in Australia. One man on his own and I think three and a half months now, it's grown worldwide.

The participation in the local gatherings thus enabled protesters to feel comfortable with and connect to other activists. Alex's experience also shows that local groups built on close-knit social networks expressed their belonging to a more national and transnational anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine collective identity (Vicari, 2014). Previous research on local protest organisations (Ozduzen, 2019; Tykanova & Khokhlova, 2020; Zhang & Hamel, 2021; Charrad and Reith, 2019), showed that local grassroots activists were

often concerned with local issues such as top-down urban redevelopment programmes or municipal solid waste and looked at local community activism in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Jupp, 2012). For instance, global social movements such as the Occupy Wall Street were also rooted in local circumstances and politics (Pickerill & Krinsky, 2012; Uitermark & Nicholls, 2012). Anti-lockdown protesters did not reconstitute the local area as a democratic project that practically addressed local collective problems, which might have arisen due to the pandemic. This, we argue, is mainly because of the political alienation felt by the social movement members (Beveridge & Koch, 2021). Local groups in the anti-lockdown protests were not autonomous entities that represented and addressed the needs of local people (Burchardt et al., 2013), but these groups came together to express their social, economic, and psychological problems about lockdown restrictions and vaccine mandates, which also connected them to the wider protest spaces in central London. This accounts for the trajectory of informal to formal bonds in anti-lockdown protests, established from informal friendship networks to local neighbourhoods, to then inform more formal national and transnational links.

The importance of local groups was also pronounced by other protesters such as Darren, who mentioned how they could not directly build strong ties in the national protest spaces:

‘You make acquaintances, not friends [in the protests], because they don’t live near me’.

As Fominaya (2010) points out, social events like post-assembly drinks and fundraising parties, where protesters share drinks and food, are crucial for the interaction of social actors as these events help them to discover their similarities (and differences). The anti-lockdown protesters discovered their similarities in local spaces before joining bigger rallies at iconic spaces such as Hyde Park in London, where people have historically participated freely in the marketplace of ideas, and have had serious and meaningful debate (Roberts, 2008). Local parks were also chosen as protest spaces, for instance Shepherd’s Bush Green in West London was repurposed by anti-lockdown protesters for local anti-lockdown protests. Prior to the anti-lockdown protests, Occupy London activists also gathered at parks such as Finsbury Park in London at a moment of rupture (Halvorsen, 2015). During lockdowns, however, local parks across the UK became more important for protesters and exchange of ideas, as other types of semi-public spaces such as pubs and halls were not available for public use and travelling in and out of local areas was prohibited.

### **4.3. Emotions and collective identity in the anti-lockdown protests**

What created ‘we-ness’ and brought protesters around the slogan ‘freedom’ was also the shared emotions of anger and resentment. Mutual sharing and commenting on the slogan ‘freedom’ fuelled the emotions of anger and resentment on social media platforms and in physical protest spaces (Papacharissi, 2016). Resentment emerged from emotions such as envy, hatred, and malice towards another person and appealed to protesters who experience fear and insecurity about their lives and have disappointment and distrust in politics (Salmela & Von Scheve, 2017). Anger, on the other hand, is likely to arise with the perception that a frustrating event is certain, unfair, and externally

caused (Rico et al., 2017). Our interviews revealed that protesters who experienced a sense of marginalisation, insecurity, and frustration and felt that mainstream politics has abandoned them (Flinders, 2018), due to their prior distrust in politics and their feelings towards strict lockdown and health restrictions, came together around the slogan ‘freedom’.

However, the anger articulated around the slogan did not automatically translate into a common political goal. Reminiscent of the slogans such as ‘we are the 99%’ from other digitally supported protests, e.g. the Occupy movement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), the slogan ‘freedom’ had different meanings for a diverse body of protesters and they expressed different feelings with it, such as ‘feeling forced to be vaccinated’, ‘feeling pressurized to wear a mask’ or ‘feeling under economic or social insecurity due to lockdowns’. Disengaging from politics, as protesters did, removes the political character of decision-making and reduces the capacity and scope for political agency. Thus, despite the anger and resentment felt by the protesters, a discursively anti-political social movement appeared (Wood, 2016). In this anti-political framework, common concerns and grievances were not reflected as the collective concern of the group but were widely referred to at the level of the first-person pronoun ‘I’. For instance, Carly recounted:

I am concerned for myself, because I have my own needs, my own specific things, I know some people are concerned about their jobs. Mine is fine at the moment, I don’t need to be concerned about that.

Similarly to this statement of Carly, our other interviews also showed that the motivation of mobilisation in these protests derived from personalized interests of protesters and their perception of their personal freedoms, such as enjoying social events indoors or travelling for leisure. The protesters also reported that they joined the protests because of their concerns about their everyday mobility and the disruption to their social lives, such as being prevented from seeing their friends and family and their perception of being forced to follow social distancing measures and health measures against their will. For Tom, for instance, the restrictions on their freedom meant that their everyday routines were disrupted, such as their ability to go to a music venue. Amelia also mentioned that they were outraged that they had to travel only after they had a PCR test and feared that they would not be able to travel without a vaccine in the future. This was the main reason that they joined the protests, as their everyday freedoms were restricted, and their sense of security was threatened due to social distancing and health measures.

The organizers of the protests also kept the concept of ‘freedom’ vague on social media platforms to appeal to a larger and more diverse body of audiences. The initial messages on flyers advertised online were also vague: ‘bring a picnic and some music and let’s have some fun and say yes to life’ (Bloodworth, 2020). What exactly this ‘life’ denoted was left to the imagination of the sympathizers and/or participants of the social movement. Hence, although in other earlier individualized social movements such as the Occupy movement, loose ties and personalized action frames ignited a long-deferred discussion about the growth of inequality in society, anti-lockdown protests remained too self-interested and individualistic to make an impact on power and policy (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

Yet, anger was still an important unifying factor as this feeling heightens the attention and sensitivity of the protesters to perceived threats (Huddy et al., 2007). In the anti-

lockdown protests, these perceived threats were revealed particularly through the slogan 'freedom' such as 'freedom for children' and this slogan unified protesters. When asked why they attended the protests on that day, Georgina recounted that they were terrified not only for themselves but that they were also preoccupied that the perceived corrupted institutions will force their children to get vaccinated as well:

I am a woman with kids and I am terrified that the government is going to try to force me to make my kids get experimental inoculations in breach of the noronborne code of 1947 and the council of Europe resolution 2361 that says you cannot do these things. It seems all the institutions of governance, all the rule of law and supreme court are all corrupted entirely and it is terrifying to me.

The emphasis on children's abduction and their future in Georgina's account was reminiscent of QAnon's<sup>3</sup> characteristics that identify a wide-ranging and internationalized connection between an evil US government (particularly Democrats) and sexual violence against children (Miller, 2021). The feeling of threat that Georgina mentioned was also perceived to be posed by malefic political (and global) elites, who may be part of big pharmaceutical companies, governmental bodies, and/or media corporations.

Based on the protesters' already existing distrust towards news media, the belief that the media fails to defend 'freedom' of expression was also one of the most articulated themes in the protests, reflecting resentment felt towards perceived media elites. Protesters, who gathered in front of the BBC's main building, protested the public broadcaster with banners and slogans (e.g. 'the BBC is the virus'). The protest spaces are not just protest sites, but they also act as markers of identities (Yuen, 2018). Shared grievance articulated in front of the BBC building with slogans such as 'the media does not report the truth' and narratives about the complicity of the BBC and other mainstream media platforms thus amplified the emotions of anger and resentment towards media outlets, whilst forging a political common sense, where storytelling mostly about the pandemic in online and physical spaces of protests built a sense of anti-political collective identity. Our observations also showed that anti-lockdown protesters equally felt joy, due to being together with like-minded communities and expressing a shared sense of anger and resentment in front of the iconic buildings such as the BBC building and Palace of Westminster.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the growing number of research about anti-lockdown protests during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Gerbaudo, 2020; Kowalewski, 2021), little research has yet examined to what extent and how a collective identity is formed in these contentious protests. To plug this gap, this article first analysed the political identities, motivations, and values of the anti-lockdown protesters in London, which may form the collective identity of a group. Our findings show that the anti-lockdown protesters originated from different political leanings such as from past voters of the Conservatives, Labour, Lib Dems, and UKIP, but they embraced a shared anti-political attitude today and felt a collective sense of abandonment from the political mainstream (Flinders, 2018).

The shared sense of scepticism about the current state of political parties and the belief that the political mainstream was going against their values were prominent features of

the collective identity emerging from the anti-lockdown protests and constituted anti-lockdown protests in London as an anti-political social movement. Our interviews as well as participant observation during the protests showed that the protesters' distrust towards political institutions mobilized them against the perceived 'agenda' and dominance of the political elites. They rather selected and decided to vote for political parties or politicians based primarily on their pandemic policy. This paper not only discussed this as a tenet of populism but also pointed out that it was not clear in the course of this social movement how the protesters went or will go against political elites or establishment.

Examining what formed the collective identity in the anti-lockdown protests, in line with the findings of Gerbaudo and Treré (2015), our ethnographic observations and go-along interviews accounted for the facilitator role of inclusive slogans in the formation of this social movement, which first emerged on social media platforms. The slogan 'freedom', which brought the anti-lockdown activists together, helped to develop a sense of commonality and triggered two main emotions associated with anti-politics: anger and resentment (Flinders, 2018). Strong emotional rhetoric such as the one against legacy media (e.g. 'BBC is the virus') and elites (e.g. 'arrest Boris Johnson' or 'arrest Bill Gates'), spreading through the slogans and chants on both online and physical spaces, reflected anger and resentment of protesters towards political elites/institutions and made them feel part of a community.

Despite providing visibility and voice to protesters' anger, the slogan 'freedom' failed to materialize into an interactive communication environment where protesters formally defined 'who they are' and 'what they stand for' (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Milan, 2015). Instead, protesters communicated various personalized aims using the slogan 'freedom', including freedom from lockdown restrictions and/or vaccine mandates and/or the freedom to move around freely. This suggests a structureless social movement and collective identity (Krinsky & Crossley, 2014), leading to what Lichterman (1996) calls 'politics of selves' that creates a culture of individualized ways of doing things; essentially, a form of self-actualisation (Lichterman cited in McDonald, 2002). In the light of our ethnographic observations and interviews throughout the anti-lockdown protests, we associate this with the neoliberal ideas of self-interested individualism (Wood, 2016).

When we examined the connections amongst the protesters, we found that the majority of our participants attended the protests with close kin and friends rather than with the people that they met on social media platforms. As Melucci claims (1996, p. 71), collective identity continuously evolves and emerges as a result of active relationships between social actors. Our ethnographic fieldwork in anti-lockdown protests demonstrated that an active relationship amongst anti-lockdown protesters was not yet materialized on social media platforms. Although common content interacted with on social media platforms (such as Telegram channels) played an important role in the mobilisation of the anti-lockdown protests and laid out and fuelled anti-political attitudes of protesters, this paper shows that connection and strong bonds amongst protesters first developed in close-knit social relationships and networks and local spaces.

Finally, anti-lockdown protesters did not come together around localized concerns (e.g. local ecological issues), even if the protests received active participation from some local groups and social networks. Our participants rather expressed their general anger

and resentment against political elites, vaccines, and social distancing measures in their local areas, such as park gatherings. This indicated their political alienation and thus their anti-political collective identity. They built stronger ties in these ad-hoc and accessible local spaces, compared to the loose ties formed online. The extemporaneous communication on social media platforms rather aided the formation of a shared knowledge about 'alternative' social media content against the official pandemic, lockdown, and vaccine sources and facilitated sharing last minute information about protest time and place.

In order to present a more focussed analysis, this paper only presents findings on the collective identity formation in the anti-lockdown protests in London. Although we were mindful of including protesters with different demographics in our research, due to the limited number of interviewees in our sample, we suggest future researchers work on anti-lockdown protests or other similar anti-political protest movements with a view to test these results through a larger sample size. Moreover, we drew attention to the role of local protests in collective identity formation amongst anti-lockdown protesters. Future research could provide a more detailed perspective about the formation of collective identity in different local anti-lockdown and/or anti-vaccine protests.

## Notes

1. We refer to these protests as anti-lockdown protests.
2. The London mayoral candidate and member of the far-right UKIP and the Brexit Alliance.
3. QAnon (2017) is an American political conspiracy theory and movement with origins from the far-right.

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