The Blame Game? #Brexitriots as an Affective Ritualized Response to Civil Disorder in Northern Ireland

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The protests and violence in Northern Ireland in April 2021 were nominally a manifestation of Loyalist anger at the "Irish Sea border" created as part of the deal that saw the United Kingdom leave the European Union. Social media were widely blamed for having amplified tensions surrounding the protests. This study explores how affective publics, mobilized on Twitter, responded to the "Brexit riots." It does so by providing an overview of how online platforms are used during contentious episodes in divided societies, examining the background of the disorder, and presenting the results of a reflexive thematic analysis of #brexitriots tweets (*N* = 8287) posted between April 9 and April 13, 2021. Results indicate that #Brexitriots was an affective ritualized response from tweeters who appeared unaware of the manifold grievances of the protesters. They used these events as a source of partisan political expression, confirming their view that the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union was a mistake.

Keywords: social media, affective publics, crisis hashtags, Brexit

The demonstrations and related violence in Northern Ireland in April 2021 presented the biggest threat to public order in Northern Ireland for over a decade. They were nominally a manifestation of Loyalist anger at the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement (BWA) agreed by the United Kingdom (UK) government in December 2020 (Hayward & Komarova, 2022). Accusations about who was to blame for the violence circulated via both digital and traditional media platforms. Loyalist activists, who self-identified as British and many of whom voted for Brexit despite warnings this might create barriers between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, claimed they had been betrayed by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The figurehead of the Vote Leave campaign had agreed the Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP) with his European Union (EU) counterparts, which meant that there would be checks on goods traveling between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Loyalists, as well as members of other pro-union groups in the divided society, argued that this undermined their position within the United Kingdom; their anti-protocol protests were also characterized as a manifestation of their increasing dissatisfaction with the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement itself (Bryson, 2021a). Meanwhile, opponents of Brexit condemned Johnson and the Conservative government for violating the terms of the Agreement, not only through its creation of a de

facto "Irish Sea Border" but also for threatening to leave the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR; Gillespie, 2020). For perhaps the first time since the 2016 referendum, the fate of the divided society took center stage in UK politics, with Remainers accusing Leavers of pursuing a form of Brexit that threatened the peace process.

Although there have been many studies about how online platforms were used during the 2016 Brexit referendum (e.g., Bastos & Mercea, 2019), there has been no research to date exploring how social media users reacted to the terms of the United Kingdom's departure from the EU and specifically, its implications for the Northern Irish peace process. Furthermore, few studies conceptualizing event-specific hashtags as social media rituals have explored the most influential users within these ad hoc publics, or the information sources they share with others. This study sets out to address these gaps by examining how tweeters responded to the April 2021 riots in Northern Ireland. It does so by reviewing the literature on social media rituals and hybrid media events, exploring the political context of the "Brexit riots," and presenting the results of a reflexive thematic analysis of #brexitriots tweets (N = 8287) posted between April 9 and April 13, 2021.

Social Media Rituals and Hybrid Media Events

There is a burgeoning scholarship on social media communication formation during acute events. Although online discussions about these incidents can influence their trajectories, these information flows are often centered around content created by professional journalists (see Reilly & Vicari, 2021 for an overview). In particular, Twitter (rebranded X in July 2023 after its takeover by Elon Musk) disrupts hegemonic elites by turning ordinary citizens into opinion leaders (or "influencers") and enables them to participate in a form of networked gatekeeping of the information flows relating to these events (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Probably its most recognized function is the hashtag, defined as the "prefixing of a keyword or phrase with the # symbol" (O'Reilly & Milstein, 2012, p. 43). First proposed by technologist Chris Messina in 2007 as a way to categorize groups on Twitter, hashtags are key conversation markers around events as diverse as disasters, political controversies, and terrorist atrocities (Krutrök & Lindgren, 2018). Event-specific hashtags have been identified as a social media ritual during acute events that involve actions such as live-tweeting, correcting misinformation, and demonstrating empathy with those affected (Bruns, Moon, Paul, & Münch, 2016; Burgess, Mitchell, & Münch, 2019). Crucially, these "issue publics" bring communicators together for only a short period of time, becoming less popular when the reason for their formation becomes less acute (Bruns, 2023).

This study focuses specifically on how the affective publics on Twitter make sense of acute events.[2] These formations leave distinctive digital footprints and are mobilized through "affective statements of both opinion and fact" (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 317). In the case of hashtags like #RefugeesWelcome, they constitute ephemeral digital movements of opinion articulating crosscutting, shared values on a political or societal issue (Barisione, Michailidou, & Airoldi, 2019). They also provide a vehicle for social media users to critique the sociopolitical context in which an acute event has occurred (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles,

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[2] Although it was rebranded X in July 2023, the microblogging site is referred to as Twitter here to reflect the time frame in which data were collected and analyzed.

2020; Sumiala, Valaskivi, Tikka, & Huhtamaki, 2018). Hashtags can become trending topics in hybrid media systems that weave together older and newer media logics, providing "fluid opportunity structures" for online citizens to shape news agendas (Chadwick, 2017, p. 64).

The polysemic nature of crisis hashtags means they are often used for purposes not originally intended by their creators. For instance, #PorteOuverte (translated into English as "open door") evolved from being an organizational hashtag, providing assistance to those stranded in Paris during the November 2015 terror attacks, into an affective hashtag where those watching from afar expressed solidarity with the victims (Reilly & Vicari, 2021). An archetype of prosocial behavior online, these open-door initiatives emerged as ritualized connective actions during subsequent terrorist atrocities in Brussels and Nice (Tikka, 2019). Yet, there is also evidence that hashtags enable rival groups to "talk past each other," drawing attention to events that align with their views while conveniently ignoring those that do not (Jiang, Zhang, Kim, Pevehouse, & Shah, 2024). Online platforms like Twitter have contributed to affective polarization through their algorithmic amplification of extreme content posted by highly politicized users, which encourages incivility and sorts users into distinctive groups bonded by their dislike for one another (Kreiss & McGregor, 2024; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

This study contributes to the literature on crisis hashtags as a ritualized crisis communication practice by exploring the affective dimensions of #Brexitriots, one of several anti-Brexit hashtags used to discursively frame the rioting seen in Northern Ireland in April 2021. It will examine the extent to which the hashtag was used by anti-Brexit campaigners to reductively blame the NIP for the violence, while failing to acknowledge the other grievances cited by Loyalist protesters.

Social Media Rituals and Hybrid Media Events

To understand how Twitter was used to discursively frame the "Brexit riots," one must first explore the role of online platforms in the political contention surrounding the United Kingdom's departure from the EU. Brexit has been identified as one of the earliest examples of sustained political tribalism on social media (Brändle, Galpin, & Trenz, 2022). Rather than being echo chambers, public Facebook pages facilitated crosscutting political expression between Leavers and Remainers (Bossetta, Dutceac Segesten, & Bonacci, 2023). That is not to say that the interactions between both sides were always civil in nature. Pejorative labels such as "Brextremist" (applied to Leavers) and "Remoaner" (referring to those wishing to remain within the EU) reverberated online throughout the highly divisive referendum campaign in 2016 (North, Piwek, & Joinson, 2021). This use of "othering" language was very often in response to "soft facts," the conspiracy theories and misinformation that frequently filled gaps in public knowledge about Brexit, appearing on their social media feeds (Dobreva, Grinnell, & Innes, 2020). Twitter emerged as a key site for contesting Brexit, as it was the main network through which citizens paid attention to the public utterances of key media and political actors (Šimunjak, 2022, p. 11). The dearth of quality information online about the United Kingdom's membership in the EU was exacerbated by Vote Leave's use of bots to feed "user-curated and hyper partisan information" to those eligible to vote in the referendum (Bastos & Mercea, 2019, p. 40). Most of these amplified pro-Leave hashtags, although the two most active pro-Remain accounts were bots "mechanically retweeting messages from their side of the debate" (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016, p. 2). The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal in 2018 revealed that the Vote Leave campaign had

collaborated with the data analytics firm to microtarget voters through their Facebook feeds, although it remains unclear whether this had a significant impact on the final referendum result (Risso, 2018).

The post-referendum period saw a significant online mobilization by Remainers (now labeled Rejoiners). Activists used online platforms to lobby for a second referendum ("the People's Vote") and campaign for the United Kingdom to remain within the EU Customs Market and Single Market (Šimunjak, 2022). Pro-Remain hashtags and tweets greatly outnumbered those posted by Leavers during key events in the run-up to the United Kingdom's departure from the Union on January 31, 2020, such as the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by then-UK Prime Minister Theresa May being defeated in a vote held by the House of Commons in February 2019 (del Gobbo, Fontanella, Sarra, & Fontanella, 2021). These events triggered noticeable spikes in the use of derogatory language to define outgroups. In Brexit discussions online, which were widely perceived as toxic (North et al., 2021), Remainers were depicted as elitist and treacherous, whereas Leavers were decried as racist and ignorant. Remainers mobilized around affective hashtags such as #brexitshambles and #brexitchaos to describe the negative impact the process had on the UK economy (Šimunjak, 2022). They used Twitter to express their concerns about how leaving the Single Market and Customs Union would jeopardize the Northern Irish peace process through its creation of a trading border in the Irish Sea or on the island of Ireland, the latter being characterized as a "colonial imposition" incompatible with the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (O'Neill, 2021). In particular, the United Kingdom's proposed withdrawal from the ECHR repudiated the norms of the Agreement (Guelke, 2019). Political proponents of Brexit, such as Conservative MEP Daniel Hannan, were depicted as "villains" for pursuing divergence from the EU at seemingly any cost, including a resurgence of violence in Northern Ireland (Cochrane, 2020, p. 164). Although online platforms were used by these affective publics to bypass party politics, there was some evidence that their opinions were guided by mainstream and alternative media sources; anti-Brexit social media users frequently shared newspaper articles and opinion pieces from the left-leaning *The Guardian*, whereas Brexiteers referred to the coverage of key events and issues in right-wing tabloid outlets such as *The Daily Express* (Brändle et al., 2022). These affective publics, which appeared to lie outside the sphere of formal politics, often reflected elite views on the United Kingdom's protracted departure from the EU.

The 2021 Brexit Riots

There was a renewed focus on the implications of Brexit for the Northern Irish peace process in the wake of the BWA announced in December 2020. Many of these issues had been either neglected or dismissed by Vote Leave during the 2016 referendum. The controversial NIP introduced a de facto trading border down the Irish Sea, much to the chagrin of the pro-Brexit Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) who had been repeatedly reassured by Johnson that this would not happen (Russell & James, 2022). The Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), an umbrella group representing paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Volunteer Force and Red Hand Commandos, announced in protest that they no longer supported the Belfast Agreement, urging their supporters to keep anti-Protocol demonstrations "peaceful and democratic" in March 2021 (Carroll, 2021, para. 3). Although many of these demonstrations passed off without incident, there were four consecutive nights of violent clashes between police and youths in the Waterside district of Derry (March 30–April 2), followed by rioting in loyalist areas in Belfast and Carrickfergus the week afterward that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) described as being on "a scale not seen for years" (McCurry, 2021, para. 8). Hashtags such as #brexitriots trended as tweeters accused the Johnson government of

putting the peace process at risk. Whether the young people involved in the rioting were fully aware of the implications of the NIP remains to be seen. Interviews suggested that they had only limited knowledge of the "Irish Sea border," with many participating after being told that their communities were facing an existential threat (Walsh, 2021, p. 30). Like the union flag protests eight years earlier, the anti-Protocol demonstrations and related violence articulated Loyalist dissatisfaction with the Stormont Assembly, the peace process and policing in general (Reilly, 2021). They condemned the PSNI for not prosecuting Sinn Féin Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill for breaching COVID-19 regulations by attending the funeral of senior Republican Bobby Storey in June 2020; this decision was held up as evidence of "Republican appeasement" that had "damaged Unionist/Loyalist confidence in policing and justice" (Holmes, 2021). Prominent Loyalist activist Jamie Bryson (2021a) went further in characterizing the protests as representing "all of the key issues" over the past two decades, alluding to the perception the Agreement inherently favored Republicans over Loyalists (para. 1). Moreover, "Brexit riots" provided prima facie evidence of how civil disorder remained the most effective way for marginalized groups to be heard in the "postconflict" public space. The April 2021 violence generated visibility for groups like the LCC outside Northern Ireland while also shoring up support within their own communities in the face of perceived existential threats like the Irish Sea Border (Goulding & McGrory, 2021).

Pouring Petrol From a Keyboard: Social Media and the "Brexit Riots"

The news media were quick to blame the "Brexit riots" on social media. Sky News journalist David Blevins argued that "putting out the fire on the street was difficult 'while someone, somewhere is pouring petrol from a keyboard'" (Elms, 2021, para. 13). There was some evidence to suggest the protests and related violence had been coordinated online. Messages on Facebook and WhatsApp urging Loyalist youths to "earn their strips [*sic*]" were condemned by Bryson (2021b) as "malicious and false," with Republicans said to be responsible for these anonymous accounts. The LCC denied it was responsible for these messages, warning Unionists and Loyalists "to remain vigilant to the dangers of fake and anonymous social media accounts" (Scott, 2021, para. 3). Subsequent research indicated that many of the rioters had received messages via these platforms containing places and times at which riots were expected to occur, with paramilitaries often blamed for encouraging this violence (Walsh, 2021).

Although the anti-Protocol protests and related violence undoubtedly increased the visibility of groups like the LCC, there was little online sympathy for the grievances cited by Bryson and its other key spokespersons. Congruent with previous research into contentious episodes in Northern Ireland (Reilly, 2021), the affective publics mobilized during the April 2021 riots gave little credence to claims that Loyalists were victims of political policing. Videos recorded by eyewitnesses on smartphones, including footage of a bus being petrol bombed close to the Lanark Way interface in West Belfast, provided a focal point for the ire of many of these online commentators, who condemned the violent thuggery on display (Fox, 2021). Bryson (2021a) responded angrily to claims that the teenage rioters did not understand the complexities of the NIP, claiming that these (online) commentators held outdated stereotypical views of loyalism. Meanwhile, tweeters in Great Britain framed the violence as inevitable given the UK government's pursuit of a "hard" Brexit that risked the future of the peace process by imposing a border in the Irish Sea. For example, *The Guardian* columnist Jonathan Freedland (2021) accused Johnson and his fellow Brexiteers of being "careless of the heartbreak and grief that had scarred" Northern Ireland (para. 9). This study set out

to explore the prevalence of these narratives on the violence through a qualitative analysis of tweets tagged #Brexitriots, one of the most prominent hashtags used to discursively frame the unrest.

Research Design

The following research questions emerged from the preceding literature review:

RQ1:   How did tweeters interpret the violence in April 2021?

RQ2:   Who were the most frequent contributors to #Brexitriots?

RQ3:   To what extent are discursive framings of acute events within crisis hashtags guided by mainstream media coverage?

These questions were addressed through a qualitative study of 8,287 tweets tagged #Brexitriots, posted between April 8 and April 13, 2021. These were collected in real time using the text-mining software Discovertext (discovertext.com). A time-series graph created using these data showed that there were "peaks" of activity within this hashtag between 7:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. on the morning of April 9 (see Figure 1). One interpretation of this finding was that tweeters were responding to the overnight news that the PSNI had deployed water cannons to disperse rioters who had gathered at the Springfield Road interface area in West Belfast (Leebody, 2021).
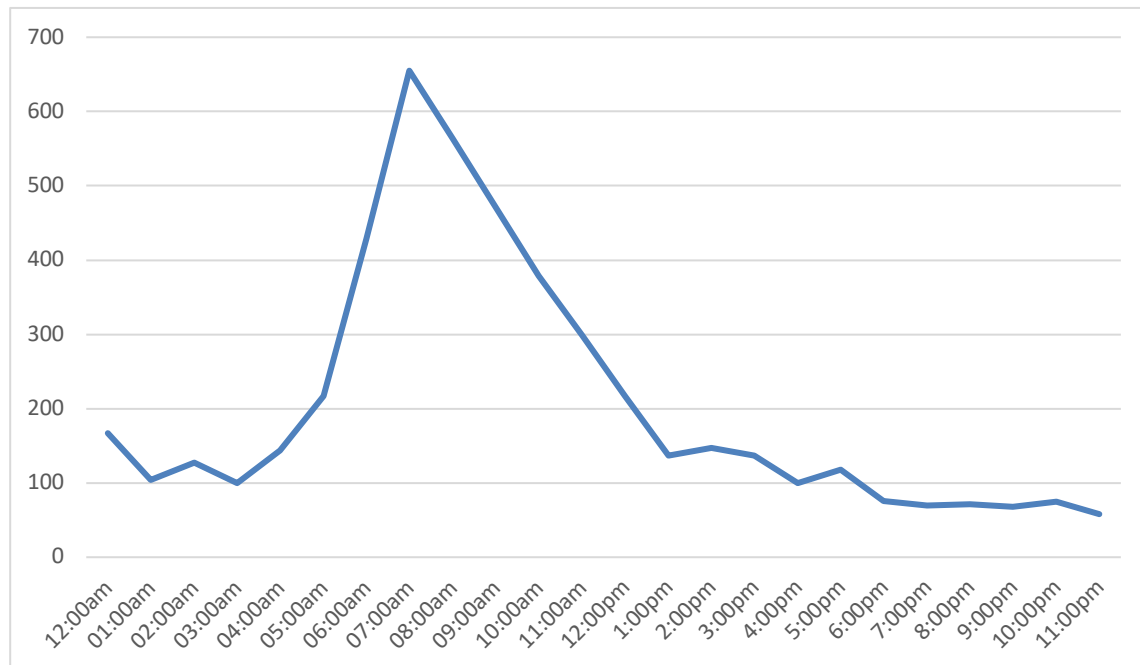

Figure 1. Number of #Brexitriots tweets, April 9, 2021.

Many tweets (*n* = 963) had been removed in the period between data collection and analysis. This may have been because these tweets (or tweeters) violated Twitter's policy on hateful conduct. However, it was not possible to determine the grounds for their removal. It should be noted that a few tweets (10) were removed because they were nonrelevant to the study, including a tweet from a social media marketing manager running a promotion for a company.

Discovertext was utilized to identify the most retweeted content within these data sets. The software package was also used to explore relevant metadata such as the timestamp for tweets, geotagged locations, and any information provided in Twitter bios pertaining to their political allegiances. The most frequent tweeters were categorized using a coding scheme adapted from a previous study (Reilly, 2021). Categories were constructed inductively to fully capture the range of actors contributing to this hashtag, including citizens (who expressed no political affiliation in their bios), anti-Brexit/Pro-EU tweeters (e.g., hashtags like #fbpe, followback, pro-European, in their handles/bios), anti-Conservatives (e.g., calling for Boris Johnson to resign), supporters of Scottish Independence, Nationalist/Republicans, and Unionist/Loyalists. Decisions about these codes were based on the textual information provided on Twitter bios (e.g., those including #proIndy were coded as pro-Scottish Independence) and/or background and profile pictures.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to qualitatively analyze #Brexitriots tweets. Specifically, the six phases of TA devised by Braun and Clarke (2021) were implemented, ranging from the initial reading of each tweet the use of field notes to capture relevant information (e.g., evidence of "othering," inductive construction of codes and themes), and ending with the writing up of the results. A particular focus was the prevalence of derogatory language in posts condemning those orchestrating the protests and related violence, or the Brexiteers who were accused of having risked the peace process to obtain a "hard" Brexit. The research approach followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework in embracing the subjectivity of coding and the "biases" of the coders (one of whom was from Northern Ireland and the other England, both of whom voted Remain). Themes are presented below using a combination of data extracts and analytic narratives. Numbers are not used to report theme frequency as it was not considered appropriate for a qualitative study exploring how affective publics made sense of the "Brexit riots."

The focus here was on what was being said rather than who said it (Reilly, 2021). Tweets from citizens with few followers were therefore paraphrased or quoted verbatim only if they could not be traced back to the original user.[3] However, non-elite accounts with more than 2,000 followers were not afforded anonymity on the basis that they were maintaining a public profile on the site.

Sample Characteristics

Most of the corpus consisted of Retweets/Modified tweets (87.81%), followed by original tweets (8.87%) and @replies (3.32%; see Figure 2). This finding was congruent with previous research into crisis hashtags, which show tweeters sharing content rather than engaging in dialogue with one another (Reilly & Vicari, 2021).

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[3] Ethics approval was obtained from the host institution before data collection.
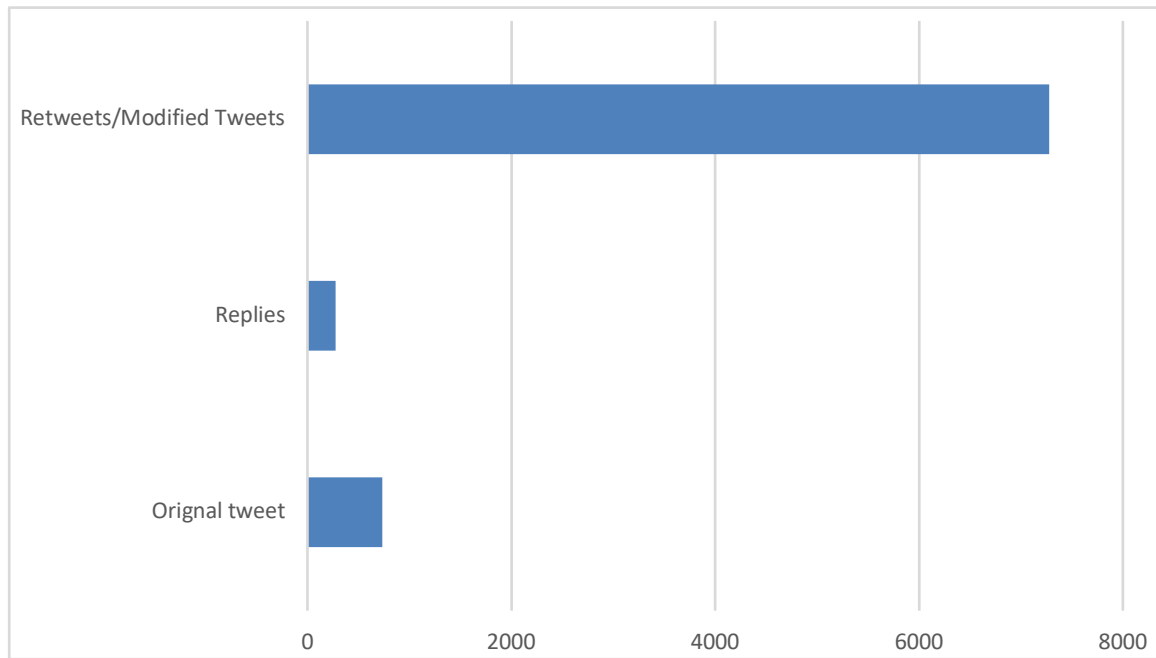
Figure 2. Classification of #Brexitriots tweets.

There were no geotagged tweets in the corpus. Analysis of locations mentioned in Twitter bios showed that most were in England, with London the most frequently cited in the corpus (see Table 1). Of the top 10 locations, Belfast was the only one from the island of Ireland. This provided evidence of not only how #Brexitriots was a hashtag created in Great Britain but also how it was being used by its citizens to define the April 2021 violence in Northern Ireland.

Table 1. Top 10 Most Frequently Mentioned Locations in Bios of #Brexitriots Tweeters.

Location	Number of tweets
London	265
London, England	257
United Kingdom	200
UK	170
England, United Kingdom	158
Scotland	80
England	69
Europe	69
North West, England	56
Belfast	53

The presence of "Europe" in this list provided further evidence of how many tweeters using this hashtag were "Remainers" who attributed the violence in Northern Ireland to the United Kingdom's departure from the EU.

Profiling #Brexitriots Tweeters

As per previous studies of hashtag publics in Northern Ireland (Reilly, 2021), a long-tail distribution of user activity was found in #Brexitriots. Of 5,371 unique tweeters, 3,936 (74.68%) contributed only once to the hashtag. In contrast, the top 50 tweeters accounted for 766 (9.24%) of these tweets.

Analysis of the top 50 #Brexitriots tweeters provided further evidence of how the violence in Northern Ireland was capturing the attention of those in Great Britain who opposed Brexit. Nineteen of these accounts expressed support for rejoining the EU through hashtags such as #fbpe and images such as a screencap of a pro-European message "This is our Star: Look After it for Us," which was projected onto the White Cliffs of Dover to mark the United Kingdom's departure from the EU on January 31, 2020 (Read, 2020). Citizens, whose bios gave no indication of their political leaning, were the next most prominent group within these "super users," followed by Socialists and pro-Scottish independence tweeters (see Figure 3). Consistent with previous research (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016), there was evidence of coordinated inauthentic behavior within #Brexitriots. Although it was difficult to say for certain whether they were automated or not, six accounts were categorized as "suspected bots" after achieving a score of four of five (or above) on Botometer.edu. It should be noted that four accounts were suspended during the period of data analysis and therefore could not be coded. It was unclear whether these users had voluntarily left the site or had been forcibly removed for violating its terms of service.
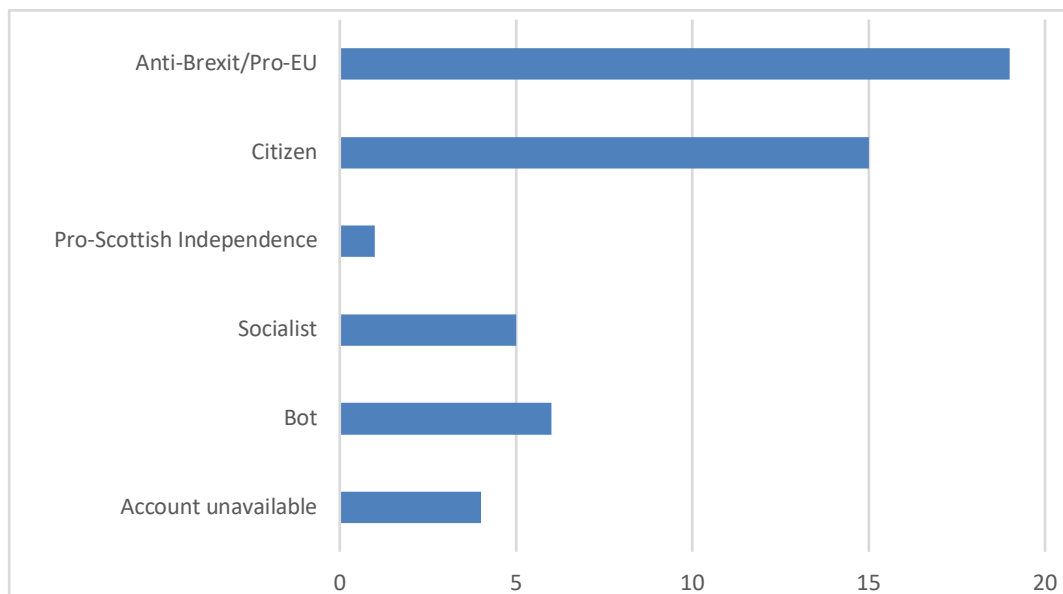

Figure 3. Top 50 #Brexitriots tweeters by actor type.

Anti-Brexit Tweeters Are the Most Retweeted in #Brexitriots

Those responsible for the 50 most shared tweets in the corpus tended to be left-leaning and pro-European. Just under half (46%) of these posts originated from anti-Brexit tweeters, with Socialists and pro-Scottish independence tweeters also represented (see Figure 4). A large proportion of these accounts (24%) were unavailable to the coders because they had been deleted or removed from the site between data collection and analysis. Commentators and journalists included tweeters such as playwright Bonnie Greer (2021) and anthro-journalist Will Black (2021). A parody Boris Johnson account PM's Orifice (2021) and scientist Richard Milne (2021) were coded as "Other."
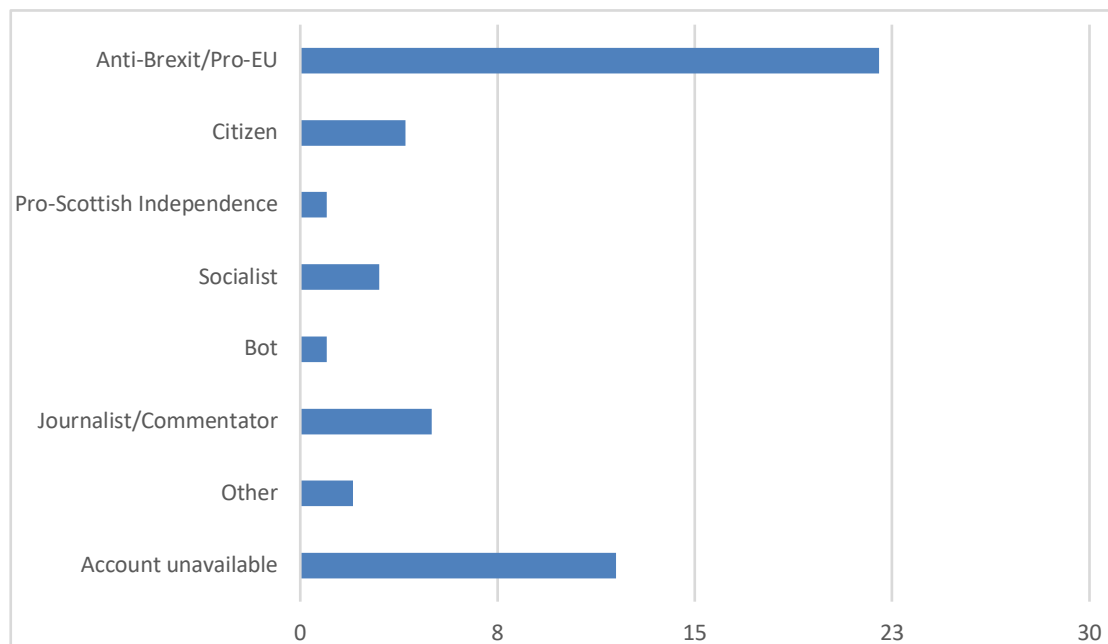

Figure 4. Authors of 50 most shared #Brexitriots tweets—by actor type.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to be acknowledged. First, the representativeness of these tweets could not be fully verified because of the limitations of the Twitter Search Application Programming Interface (API) used by Discovertext. Second, the use of the hashtag to sample tweets meant that many voices were, by definition, excluded from the study. It was inevitable that tweeters discussed the April 2021 riots without using this specific hashtag. Third, replies to hashtagged tweets that did not contain this identifier were not included. This meant that many of the conversations relating to the visual evidence of the violence were excluded from the study. Finally, these tweets were the "traces of behavior" of a small but vocal minority, from which it was not possible to automatically infer their attitudes toward the peace process in Northern Ireland (Mahrt & Scharkow, 2013, p. 24). Previous research suggests that clicks, likes, and retweets reveal little about the motivations of those who engage in these online behaviors (Karpf, 2016). Perhaps more

significantly, the coders had no way of knowing what "watchers" (i.e., those who viewed #Brexitriots but chose not to make their own contribution) felt about who was responsible for the April 2021 riots.

Results

Four primary themes were identified by the two researchers analyzing the data set, reviewing topic summaries, and discussing the merits of candidate themes (see Table 2). These are elaborated below.

Table 2. Themes Identified in RTA of #Brexitriots Tweets.

Theme	Characteristics
Riots are because of Boris Johnson's lies about Brexit	Rioting is an inevitable consequence of UK government's Brexit "disaster." Conservatives were criminally negligent in risking the hard-won peace. Boris Johnson lied to the people about the "Irish Sea Border."
Remainers warned Brexiteers this would happen	Remainers warned this would happen. Links to op-eds on how checks on goods might inflame tensions. Leavers told to "own" Brexit. DUP accused of neglecting the peace process despite warnings.
Idiots responsible for rioting, not Brexiteers	Brexiteers deny they are responsible for the Northern Ireland riots. Loyalists depicted as uneducated "chavs." Those familiar with context question analyzes that suggest violence is fueled by Brexit.
News media accused of overlooking government failings	Media challenged for paucity of coverage of events. Journalists criticized for not asking Brexiteers about their responsibility for violence. Anti-Tory hashtags highlight other perceived failings of the government.

Riots Caused by Boris Johnson's Lies About Brexit

Commentary from political elites and journalists was frequently cited by those using this hashtag to narrate the April 2021 violence. The Brexit-wing of the Conservative Party was accused of having sacrificed the "hard won" peace in Northern Ireland for their "hard" Brexit. Statements from prominent Conservative (Tory) supporters of Vote Leave were juxtaposed with pictures of teenage rioters in Belfast. For example, a quote ("I don't care if Northern Ireland falls into the f***ing sea") attributed to former Number 10 Chief Advisor Dominic Cummings was shared as evidence of their apparent disregard for the peace process (City Livery Consulting #ReJoinEU, 2021). It was not just left-wing or anti-Brexit tweeters

who directed their ire at the Brexiteers for the violence. Many citizens accused Brexiteers of telling "porky pies" about the Irish Sea Border, sharing a cartoon from *The Times* in which Loyalist rioters were seen throwing petrol bombs at a red Vote Leave campaign bus emblazoned with the slogan "No Border in the Irish Sea" (Vanbergen, 2021). The aforementioned *Guardian* article by Jonathan Freedland (2021) was one of several op-eds shared that framed the violence as a direct consequence of Brexit.

Elsewhere, citizens shared more lighthearted, irreverent posts blaming Brexiteers for the rioting. For example, one posted a picture of a teenage rioter in front of a fire, asking whether this was the "Festival of Brexit" announced by May in 2018. Another parodied the style of a news organization in a tweet announcing that the government would enter an "accountability blackout" for the duration of the Northern Ireland riots. There were also many anti-Brexit memes in the corpus. For example, the "How it started . . . how it's going" one showed an image of the National Health Service (NHS) pledge on the side of the Vote Leave red bus alongside a press photograph of a burning bus on a Belfast street ([u/mrdougan], 2021; see Figure 5).

Figure 5. The start of the Brexit riots ([u/mrdougan], 2021).

There was also a meme taken from an episode of *The Simpsons* (Odenkirk & Anderson, 2016), in which a character stands beside a sign bearing the message "Number of days since last British Government Shitshow" ([u/trailer8k], 2021; see Figure 6). Although these were irreverent in nature, they nevertheless conveyed the message that Johnson's Brexit deal was the main cause of the April 2021 rioting.

Figure 6. The Simpsons' British government shit show ([u/trailer8k], 2021).

Most tweeters held UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson personally responsible for the disorder. A recurring theme was that he had lied to push through his "oven ready" Brexit deal a year earlier. Hashtags such as #liarboris were commonly used alongside #Brexitriots in posts questioning the honesty of the prime minister. He was labeled a "habitual liar" who should apologize for having recklessly endangered the fragile peace in Northern Ireland. A few clips were shared as evidence of his bad faith promises to Unionists that no "Irish Sea Border" would be created as a consequence of the United Kingdom leaving the EU. Will Black shared a Channel 4 news interview of a speech in which Johnson stated that no UK government could sign up to a deal that left Northern Ireland under the rules of the EU (sarcastically), adding that "Boris Johnson should be free to lie in whatever way he likes and then change his tune and lie again, in a two-faced way, without you critical, leftist, radical miscreants sharing evidence like this to embarrass him" (Black, 2021). Other videos highlighted Johnson's alleged lies and mistruths about Brexit, both during and after the 2016 campaign. This included footage of his speech at a DUP party conference denying there would be a border created down the Irish Sea (even telling delegates they had his permission to put documentation for transporting goods in the bin). This focus on his alleged dishonesty was encapsulated by one tweet: "Boris Lies, Peace Dies" (Joe, 2021). Overall, #Brexitriots tweeters believed the April 2021 rioting was because of Boris Johnson's lies about Brexit and the Conservative government's fixation with securing Brexit at all costs, including peace in Northern Ireland.

Remainers Warned Brexiteers This Would Happen

Many Remainers believed their concerns over Brexit's impact on the Northern Irish peace process had been ignored. They chided Brexiteers for not paying attention to these warnings and called on them to "own" the mess they had created. There was little satisfaction expressed about being proven right about Brexit's potential to unravel the delicate peace in Northern Ireland. The DUP were characterized as "sycophants" who were as responsible as Tory Brexiteers for the violence. The largest unionist party was reminded of tactical mistakes such as backing Brexit during the 2016 referendum campaign and rejecting May's backstop in favor of Johnson's deal. Others were less kind in tweets, mocking the DUP for being deceived by Johnson's assurances about the "Irish Sea Border" and reveling at the prospect that Brexit might bring Irish reunification a step closer. A self-identified "pan-European" tweeter proclaimed that

Northern Ireland was "the last remaining vestige of Britain's colonial empire" and was "only held together by the antediluvian bigots of the DUP and the Tory political class at Westminster" (Warner, 2021).

Many Remainers/Rejoiners expressed despair at the actions of the Johnson government and pushed back on any suggestion that they too were responsible for the violence. When commentators such as Dan Hodges suggested Remainers were at fault for pursuing a People's Vote to overturn Brexit, they were reminded "we never wanted any of this shit. We warned you!" (SMR Pro-European Radio, 2021). They frequently tweeted that they knew what they had voted for during the 2016 Referendum, in contrast to #Brexshit voters who appeared ignorant about the implications for the border on the island of Ireland. In these tweets, they also referenced the rhetoric deployed by the Vote Leave campaign in 2016, asking Brexiteers "how's Project Fear going?" (Banx, 2021). Hashtags such as #Brexitreality featured in posts reiterating that any form of exit from the EU was incompatible with the Belfast Agreement. For example, an old Twitter thread by comedian Patrick Kielty (2018) warning Boris Johnson that his "Brexit lies had opened a Pandora's box for Northern Ireland" was reshared and praised by many #Brexitriots contributors. Pro-EU campaigners echoed these sentiments, expressing anger at claims that nobody could have anticipated a post-Brexit resurgence of violence in Northern Ireland.

Idiots Responsible for Rioting, Not Brexiteers

Counternarratives on the rioting accounted for a very small proportion of the tweets in the corpus. A handful of these were attributed to pro-Leave Tory voters, who rejected the notion that Brexit had "made some idiots in NI riot" (TJ-, 2021). A larger proportion of this cohort focused more on the historical context of the violence. Those familiar with the ritualized atavism of rioting in the post-Agreement era challenged simplistic analyzes blaming the Johnson government for the violence seen in Belfast, Carrickfergus, and Derry. These tweeters pointed out that many of the historic divisions and tensions remained intact over two decades since the Agreement. They also used derogatory language to describe those responsible for the violence, although the LCC were conspicuously absent from these posts. One such tweet called the rioters "chavs" and summarized the Troubles as a conflict between two "teams of backward gimps." That this tweeter erroneously defined the Northern Irish conflict as a purely religious one was perhaps illustrative of how even these tweeters lacked knowledge about the divided society.

News Media Accused of Overlooking Government Failings

The other tweets in the corpus tended to focus more on the perceived failings of the Conservative government rather than address the reasons why the April 2021 violence had occurred. For example, a link was shared to an article exploring anti-Semitism within the ruling Conservative Party that contained multiple anti-Tory hashtags such as #notfittogovern, #torycorruption, #torylies, and #brexitshambles. It made no reference to the violence in Northern Ireland, or who was responsible for it, but implied that these issues were being ignored by legacy media organizations. There were also a few tweets in the corpus referring to institutional racism within the United Kingdom and criticizing the government for failing to address these societal issues. As discussed earlier, this finding illustrated how #brexitriots was one of many anti-Tory hashtags being used in a coordinated manner during this period.

#Brexitriots contributors complained that the information they received about Brexit from legacy media was of low quality. The paucity of coverage of the violence was held up as evidence of how this client journalism was working in favor of the prime minister. Author Andrew Godsell (2021) noted that #Brexitriots "briefly became national TV news yesterday" after trending on Twitter for several days. The "Tory Press" was accused of ignoring the violence in favor of headlines focusing on "Summer Holidays." Some also claimed that the BBC were silent on the violence and the government had used the death of the Duke of Edinburgh as a "handy excuse" for a media blackout. Channel 4 News and *The Guardian* were exempt from this criticism and cited as sources by left-wing, pro-Remain/Rejoiners who criticized the "Tory Press" for their coverage of the violence. Yet, for the most part, #brexitriots was an affective rather than an informational hashtag. Complaints about information quality revolved around the 2016 Brexit referendum rather than the media's failure to report the factors underpinning Loyalist disillusionment with the peace process.

Conclusion

The first empirical study of #Brexitriots found that tweeters knew little about the Northern Irish context and perpetuated stereotypical views of Loyalists as "chavs" and "idiots." Few recognized the ritualized atavism of rioting in postconflict Northern Ireland. There was little to no mention of the LCC or paramilitary involvement in the rioting. Rather, this was a hashtag dominated by pro-Remain, left-wing tweeters, most of whom were based in England, and whose focus was firmly on Brexit rather than the fragile peace in Northern Ireland. They were broadly connected by affective statements expressing anger at how the Northern Irish peace process had been endangered by the lies told by the UK government about the "Irish Sea Border." Prime Minister Boris Johnson in particular was singled out for being a bad-faith actor who had misled the DUP and Unionists to secure his desired form of "hard" Brexit. There was also some evidence that coordinated, inauthentic behavior was amplifying anti-Brexit hashtags like this one.

The affective public promoting this hashtag were using the April 2021 riots as part of a broader attack on Brexit and its advocates. Tweets in the corpus were often accompanied by other anti-Brexit and anti-Conservative hashtags, such as #brexitshambles. Memes and tweets dating back to previous contentious events during the United Kingdom's departure from the EU were recycled here, such as quotes from former Number 10 Chief Advisor Dominic Cummings and a personal statement from comedian Patrick Kielty. This arguably demonstrated a "colonial" view of community relations in Northern Ireland that made no allowances for the views of marginalized communities, like the Loyalists protesting against the NIP. In effect, tweeters in Great Britain reinforced the communicative deficit underpinning Loyalist rioting (Goulding & McGrory, 2021). Presumably they believed that the conflict was long over and were unaware of the growing disillusionment with the peace process within these marginalized communities. It also corroborated previous research indicating that left-wing, pro-Remain tweeters were more vocal than Leavers on the microblogging site following the 2016 referendum (del Gobbo et al., 2021). However, it should be acknowledged that the sampling strategy meant it was not possible to tell how people responded to these tweets or whether these exchanges were antagonistic in nature. It was possible that many of the reductive analyzes in the corpus were challenged by other tweeters who were more familiar with these issues.

This study contributes to the literature on affective publics and hybrid media events in two ways. First, it demonstrates the continued importance of elites as both a source and target of partisan

political expression that mobilizes affective publics. Op-eds by professional journalists were often shared by non-elites within a hashtag partially motivated by frustration at the failure of the media to hold politicians to account for Brexit. Meanwhile, the ire of these tweeters was directed at prominent Brexiteers such as Boris Johnson. Although online platforms create fluid opportunity structures within hybrid media systems, non-elites appear unlikely to reach large audiences unless they engage with professional journalism in their posts. Second, hashtags such as #brexitriots can be characterized as affective ritualized responses to crisis events from groups feeling marginalized by mainstream media and political institutions. Many Remain and left-wing tweeters expressed anger and frustration at their concerns over Brexit being ignored by political elites. They drew attention to the disorder as it confirmed their predictions on how Brexit threatened the fragile peace in Northern Ireland, while ignoring other factors contributing to the violence.

Although it is not possible to ascertain whether or not this was because of a lack of knowledge, the hashtag contributed to the affective polarization around these issues. There was also some evidence to suggest it was an orchestrated rather than an ad hoc online action. Tweets discursively framing the April 2021 rioting used multiple anti-Brexit hashtags, with suspected bots being used to amplify this content. This raises questions about whether event-specific hashtags like this one can really be considered authentic representations of public opinion. The most visible social media posts in these communication formations appear to be the product of concerted efforts to promote certain agendas, rather than a cacophony of citizen voices spontaneously empowered by online platforms. The fluid opportunity structures of hybrid media systems seem somewhat constricted by the activities of these political operatives and their ability to leverage algorithms so effectively. The disruptive potential of online platforms, particularly in relation to turning ordinary citizens into opinion leaders, would appear to be overstated.

Future research could profitably explore the extent to which these supposedly "bottom-up" hashtag publics rely on coordinated, inauthentic behavior to reach large audiences. It should also examine the role of bots in communication formations that emerge on platforms like Facebook and TikTok during acute events. Despite Elon Musk's vow to turn X (the site formerly known as Twitter) into a digital town square, recent research indicates that the microblogging site is awash with bot networks that amplified hate speech and mis- and disinformation during events such as the 2024 U.S. presidential election (Steffen, 2024). Cross-platform research is therefore necessary to ascertain whether other platforms are as polluted as X, and if so, for whose benefit. Although the API-calypse, wherein X and Meta have effectively shut down free API access for researchers (Bruns, 2019), might make this work harder, this study illustrates its importance for understanding how citizens respond to acute events.

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