Institut européen
European Institute

Master in Advanced European and International Studies

European Integration and Global Studies

Young vs Old: Brexit, Identity and the Generational Battle for Belonging

Supervised by Matthias Waechter

Clarissa Louisa Maddison

2025

"It is not just the economy, stupid - Brexit is about belonging"
- *Fintan O'Toole*, *The Irish Times*

Abstract

The 2016 Brexit referendum is one of the most polarising events in modern British history. The vote exposed a deep and enduring identity divide across British society. One of the most striking divides behind voting behaviour was generational.

With references to constructivism and key identity theory covering generational identity, national and supranational identity, this study first explores how politicised ideas of British identity led to the generational split in voting behaviour. Analysis of Leaver vs Remainer identity, Brexit campaign rhetoric and media narratives demonstrate how the Brexit outcome was a symptom of societal divides derived from contrasting visions of *Britishness.*

Older voters supported a return to a pre-EU national identity, whereas younger voters, with a lived experience of globalisation and European integration, embraced a more cosmopolitan identity. This thesis argues that Brexit was not merely a political or economic decision but rather an identity-driven event, socially constructed through political discourse, historical narratives, and media representations.

The second part of the thesis examines how Brexit has subssequently altered youth identity formatiton. Findings suggest that younger people increasingly see Brexit as a loss for Great Britain, both economically and culturally. Young people feel more unsettled on their identity, attributing negative connotations to British symbols and distancing themselves from perceptions of *Britishness.* Some feel more European as a consequence of losing European citizenship.

This study views Brexit as a real consequence of an ongoing crisis of identity, with generational tensions shaping the future of British society. Younger generations are shaping a changing geopolitical landscape in the UK, showing greater disillusionment and overall involving themselves increasingly in politics, including alternative politics and new forms of populism.

This research contributes to broader discussions on nationalism, generational identity in politics, and the role of constructivism in shaping political behaviour. This

thesis offers a deeper understanding of why the referendum unfolded as it did and how its legacy continues to shape the UK's cultural and political landscape.

Keywords: Brexit, Identity, Generational Identity, Constructivism

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor for his support, along with all those who participated in interviews and dedicated their time to share their honest reflections.

I would also like to thank the faculty and staff of the Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE) for providing an academically stimulating and internationally engaged environment in which to pursue this work.

Finally, thank you to my family and classmates in Rome for their unwavering support and for keeping spirits high throughout the writing process.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Background and Context

"Age seems to be the dividing line in British politics" observed polling group YouGov in 2017 (Kingman, 2017). Nearly one decade after the United Kingdom (UK) voted by a narrow margin to leave the European Union (EU) in a deeply divisive referendum, Brexit remains a defining political moment and a site of national self-reflection. Citizens faced questions of "who am I, and where do I belong?" — and different generations had different answers (Palmer, 2021).

To understand the subject of this thesis, an overview of the context is essential. In 2016, Britain voted to withdraw from the EU by a 52 per cent to 48 per cent majority (BBC News, 2016). The official withdrawal took place in 2020, following four years of 'Brexit deal' negotiations. The Brexit referendum was included in David Cameron's 2015 Conservative manifesto as a strategic move to counter the rising popularity of the anti-immigration party UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party, formerly named the 'Brexit Party' and now renamed 'Reform UK') which had long advocated for leaving the EU under figurehead Nigel Farage at a time when immigration was dominating the political agenda (Clarke et al., 2017).

By the early 2010s, UKIP was gaining support, exerting pressure on the Conservative government to respond. At the time, all major political parties, including Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, supported continued EU membership and opposed both withdrawal and a referendum. According to Kavanagh (2018), Cameron's decision to promise a referendum was largely motivated by internal party management and the perceived need to neutralise UKIP's threat, later described as a 'great miscalculation' (Sloam and Henn, 2016).

The referendum followed a decade long period of political instability in the UK (Kavanagh, 2018); which included the 2014 Scottish Referendum, a shock 2015 election result, followed by the referendum on EU membership. This instability arguably marks an identity crisis (Crozier, 2020; Keating, 2021). The Brexit result was

largely unexpected, as Cameron had been confident of winning the Remain vote, a claim widely supported by polls as seven in 10 voters expected a victory for Remain, including a majority of those who voted Leave (Singh, 2016). Cameron resigned almost immediately after the result. His resignation was followed by an election called by Theresa May three years before the end of the Conservative mandate in the hopes of securing a stronger position, yet ended up with a reduced majority and in a weaker position to negotiate Brexit withdrawal agreements (Kavanagh, 2018).

The Brexit referendum exposed deep social divisions within the United Kingdom, especially along generational lines. 73 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds voted Remain, compared to just 40 per cent of citizens aged 65+, and 57 per cent of 55 to 64 year olds (Kelly, 2016), revealing an overall "pro-EU youth and Eurosceptic elders" (Fox and Pearce, 2017). Contrary to assumptions about class-based voting, the most significant demographic divides were age and education. The outcome also reflected sharp regional contrasts. While England and Wales voted overall to leave, London and the SouthEast backed Remain, as did Scotland and Northern Ireland, where support for remaining in the EU was decisive (BBC, 2021). Value-based differences were particularly stark: 66 percent of 'social traditionalists' voted to leave the EU, compared to only 18 percent of 'social liberals' (Kavanagh, 2018).

The Brexit campaign involved huge media engagement from both 'Leave' and 'Remain' sides, with extensive discourse remaining prevalent in British media and beyond. The polarising nature of the debate and expansive media coverage led to the highest turnout since the 1992 General Election (Clarke et al., 2017), and took place in a period of high youth engagement coined as a 'Youthquake' (Sloam and Henn, 2019), following decades of low youth electoral turnout.

As of 2025, the legacy of Brexit is still shaping UK politics. Reform UK, formerly UKIP, continues to gain ground and outperformed both Conservative and Labour candidates in the May 2025 local council elections (BBC, 2025), signalling the enduring appeal of anti-establishment and anti-immigration rhetoric.

In summary, Brexit can be understood as a shock event that catalysed a period of intense political mobilisation and social division. It also occurred at a time where heightened youth engagement further exposed generational divides in values and visions of national identity. This thesis explores age as a key variable in the Brexit result and investigates how the event has shaped the identities of young people in the UK in its aftermath.

Research Question and Objectives

Main Research Question:

"How did the generational divide in the Brexit referendum reflect identity as a key driver of the vote, and how has Brexit subsequently shaped youth identity in the UK?"

This thesis entails two main hypotheses, firstly, that Brexit was primarily an identity-driven debate revealing a generationally divided society, and secondly, that Brexit was an event which has since altered youth identity formation.

This study compares how competing identities shaped voting behaviour during the referendum, and how youth perceptions of both British and European identity have altered in its aftermath. This study aligns with scholars viewing Brexit as a phenomenon (Pimor, 2018) due to its social, cultural and political impact on the international geo-political landscape.

By centring the generational divide, the study aims to illuminate the sociocultural dimensions of Brexit and to explore how young people have negotiated the shifting ideas of belonging and identity.

The key objectives of this research are:

- To investigate the role of identity in shaping youth voting behaviour during the Brexit referendum, with particular attention to national, European, and generational identity markers.

- To explore how younger and older generations conceptualise British and European identity.
- To assess how these identities are constructed, maintained, or challenged in the post-Brexit era, examining how Brexit altered young people's individual and collective identity construction.

This thesis contributes to academic debates on identity and generational conflict, by providing both an empirical and qualitative account of youth experiences and attitudes.

Justification and Significance

The reasons behind the Brexit result and investigations into British identity are topics which have been covered by many scholars. However, investigations into what the generational divide specifically tells us about identity and how Brexit has affected the identity of young people *since* the vote and official withdrawal of the UK in 2020 has been relatively uncovered.

The generational gap, whilst economic reasons undoubtedly played a role, reflects identity as the main driver of voting behaviour. Whilst the 'Remain' side's discourse, in defence of the status-quo, focused on the economic benefits of EU membership, the 'Leave' side relied on key issues of national identity, with rhetoric focused on migration issues. Less than 5 years after the official withdrawal of the UK from the EU in 2020, the results of long-term social, political and economic consequences of Brexit are becoming more apparent. Young people and their future opportunities have arguably been among the most directly affected age group, particularly through the loss of popular schemes such as Erasmus Plus, which promoted funded mobility opportunities, including academic exchanges and internships.

The study adds to the significance of studying European integration and identities after multiple shock events facing the EU (Hodson and Puetter, 2019), and over a decade of political instability in the UK. It also addresses a gap in the literature on European identity, as despite a pluralism of theory surrounding European Integration, literature often focuses on institutions rather than citizens thus not accounting for

domestic political dynamics (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009), or the varying responses to Europeanisation from different generations. By examining European identity in the case of Brexit, it draws in relevant research in considering how different generations perceive, construct and reject what it means to be European.

Methodology

This thesis adopts a mixed-method, two-part structure to investigate how Brexit was an identity-driven event, and the long-term implications of Brexit on youth identity. A two part structure is therefore apt for this thesis.

Methodology For Part One

To understand the consequences of Brexit on identity formation of young people, we must first understand how Brexit was a generational war, driven by identity. The first part of this thesis investigates relevant identity theory, analyses discourses of the Leave campaign, media use and the generational identity divide, to assess to what extent identity was the underlying driver of the Brexit result, and if Brexit truly is a marker of identity crisis.

Methodology for Part Two

The second part of the thesis employs a mixture of quantitive and qualitative data. Secondary data is used from polls, reports and electoral statistics on how young people feel about Brexit today, and how political attitudes have shifted since the referendum. To offer insight into how this may subsequently have impacted identity construction, interviews were conducted over Zoom with 15 British citizens aged 18 to 30 (Appendix A).

This age group was selected for two key reasons. First, younger voters were statistically far more likely to vote Remain in the 2016 Brexit referendum, making them a critical demographic for understanding how identity shaped voting behaviour. Second,

individuals currently aged 18 to 30 either voted in the referendum as young adults or were too young to vote but have since come of age, meaning they are uniquely positioned to reflect on both the immediate and longer-term identity implications of Brexit.

Participants were selected to reflect a degree of geographical diversity across the UK, with the following regional representation: two from Teesside, Essex and Birmingham, three from London, two from Scotland, and one from Wales, Northern Ireland, Newcastle, and Leeds. The sample included seven men and eight women, ensuring a balance of gender perspectives. This distribution aimed to capture a range of views from across the UK's nations and regions, including both urban and semi-urban contexts.

Interviews took a semi-structured format with open-ended questions to gather both demographic context and qualitative insights into participants' identities and perspectives. Participants were asked whether they could vote in the Brexit referendum, how they voted (if they did), and how they would vote now. These questions are designed to explore how perspectives may have shifted, probing emotional responses to the referendum outcome.

A central part of the interview investigates perception of participants' national and European identities. Respondents are asked to define what each identity means to them, to what extent they identify with their perception, and whether they think their self-identifications have changed since Brexit. These questions aim to uncover the nuances of national and supranational identity among younger people, and investigate how Brexit has disrupted or reinforced these categories.

A prompt was included asking why younger and older generations may have voted differently. This is intended to elicit participants' reflections on generational identity and value differences, which can offer insight into how identity-based explanations intersect with perceptions of generational conflict.

The final open-ended question invites respondents to share any additional thoughts. This allows space for unanticipated themes to emerge relevant to that person, ensuring the methodology remains flexible and respondent-led.

Limitations and Bias

While this research aims to offer an insightful and reflective contribution to this topic, limitations and potential biases must be acknowledged. My personal experiences as a 24 year old British person mean my social positioning may therefore shape my own understanding of identity and political belonging. This positionality is both a strength, providing lived insight and an expansive network of young people to participate in interviews, and a limitation, as it may influence emphasis on certain interpretations.

Interviews are illustrative but cannot be taken as a representation for the whole population. As participants in interviews for this thesis are primarily drawn from my own university networks, this means respondents are more likely to have a higher level of education. Consequently, perspectives from less-educated or politically disengaged young people may be underrepresented. Therefore, extra efforts were made to analyse and reference individuals with different backgrounds throughout, through secondary sources and polling data.

In addition, although this thesis centres on the generational divide, age intersects with factors such as region, class, ethnicity, and access to education, all of which also shape how people understand and relate to national and political identities.

This thesis uses generational framing to assess how Brexit was an identity-driven event and how it subsequently has impacted youth identity formation, but age should therefore not be interpreted as a fully explanatory or uniform category. Research covering other demographic factors behind the Brexit result will also be useful in understanding social, political and cultural dynamics and how they intersect with different interpretations of identity across the UK, notably education and class, which like age, also had stark differences in voting behaviours.

Finally, this study is limited by its time frame, and therefore creates hypotheses of Brexit as a relatively recent event that has affected and will continue to influence identity of young people in the UK, but cannot account for longer-term developments. The post-Brexit EU-UK relationship is constantly changing and therefore its effects on identity will continue to unfold well beyond the scope of this research. Thus, conclusions about lasting identity impacts are drawn and understood through the current international political climate.

Literature Review

This thesis examines how young people's identities have been shaped by the Brexit referendum and its aftermath. As aforementioned, whilst a diverse body of scholarship explores the role of identity in explaining voting behaviour in 2016, considerably less attention has been paid to subsequent effects on identity formation.

Several think tanks and polling organisations have documented changes in young people's attitudes towards the EU post-Brexit, including the National Centre for Social Research, John Smith Centre, and YouGov, highlighting sustained generational divergence in outlook (Curtice and Scholes, 2024; National Centre for Social Research, 2025; Difford, 2025a, Difford, 2025b). However, studies touch on this topic yet often treat young people as monolithic group and offer limited further insight into emotional responses, and internal divisions. This thesis addresses that gap by engaging directly with youth narratives and identity construction, through qualitative interviews, identity theory and academic literature.

A key body of scholarship used in this thesis examines how identity shaped the Leave and Remain campaigns. Clarke et al. (2017) show that cultural and values-based divides were more predictive of voting behaviour than class or income. This aligns with the work of Kenny (2016), who argued that English identity and post-imperial nostalgia played a central role in the campaigning, with reference to Rhetorical Political Analysis in understanding emotion in voting behaviour (White, 2023).

The generational divide is consistently highlighted as one of the strongest predictors of voting behaviour. Young people were more likely to vote Remain and to do so for identity-related reasons, such as internationalism, mobility, and openness. Sloam and Henn (2019) describe this as a form of cosmopolitanism, contrasting with the nationalistic narratives that mobilised older voters. The Intergenerational Foundation's *Generation Remain* report (Kingman, 2017) examines why young voters overwhelmingly supported remaining in the EU, linking their stance to pro-European values such as internationalism, mobility, and openness.

However, these reports tend to stop at descriptive insights, without deeper analysis of how these values have evolved in the post-referendum years. A limited but emerging body of research has begun to explore the identity consequences of Brexit on youth. Lee, Beech, and McDowell (2024) conceptualise young people as occupying a "liminal" space, excluded from full political agency yet strongly affected by its outcomes. Their work connects feelings of political powerlessness with identity uncertainty and growing disconnection from traditional politics. Pimor (2020) also frames Brexit as a sociopolitical rupture, especially for younger generations who viewed the EU as a given part of their identity.

To contextualise public discourse and political narratives, key media sources such as *BBC News*, *The Guardian*, and *The Telegraph* were also consulted. Scholarly articles and media analysis supplement this, including a plethora of scholars in *EU Referendum Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign* (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016), offering an early examination of how the media shaped public discourse during the campaign, analysing 1,559 newspaper articles across major outlets. This analysis helps contextualise the political climate in which young voters made their decisions and experienced the result.

This thesis in Part II, draws on key identity theories that are explored in detail in the second chapter. In addition to qualitative interviews, election results and patterns of voting behaviour are analysed to contextualise identity trends. Secondary data from public opinion sources such as YouGov (Difford, 2025), the National Centre for Social Research (Curtice, 2025), and the Jack Petchey Foundation (2019) are used to

supplement these insights. These surveys provide a broader framework through which to understand individual narratives. The combination of qualitative depth and quantitative breadth enables a more holistic understanding of the sociocultural impact of Brexit.

Part I: Constructing Brexit: Identity, Discourse and Generational Division

Chapter One: Identity Theoretical Framework and Key Concepts

In order to discuss Brexit result as an identity crisis, it is relevant to apply a constructivist lens which understands identity as a combination of shared values and belief systems. This chapter discusses theories of identity relevant to Brexit and offers a definition of key identities; National (British and English), generational, and European identities.

1.1 Introducing Constructivism and Political Identity

A constructivist lens is useful to analyse Brexit as an identity crisis. Constructivism emphasises that political behaviour is shaped by socially constructed identities, values, and norms (Albinger, 2020; Wendt, 1992). In this view, actors act not simply based on interests, but on who they perceive themselves to be. Constructivism is thus preferred by scholars on theoretical literature surrounding Brexit, over neorealism or neoliberalism, due to the emphasis on identity and Europeanization: the assimilation of European norms and laws at a domestic level (Gibbins, 2020).

In constructivist theory, people are agents in that they are given chances to participate in society. The Brexit referendum thus gave citizens — agents — a choice, which according to constructivism, choices are always made on social constructions (Onuf, 2012). Constructivism is a paradigm in which Brexit can be understood as a choice, as it focuses on power and identity in political decision making (Albinger, 2020).

Brexit is widely understood as a rupture in competing identity narratives, especially between generations (Kenny, 2016; Kaufmann, 2018). Constructivist theory, particularly Anderson's (1983) concept of "imagined communities," helps explain how both national and European identities are not fixed, but are continually redefined through political discourse and social experience.

This generational divide in identity perception and common belief-systems is central to understanding the referendum outcome. Research shows that younger voters construct more cosmopolitan, European identities (Nissen, 2014; Dennison and Carl, 2019). With values shaped by globalisation, education, and freedom of movement, young people may identify more strongly with European norms (Jamieson et al., 2020). Conversely, The Leave campaign's appealed to older voters due to drawing on deeply embedded national identity narratives. Constructivism allows us to frame these identities as products of social and cultural processes rather than inherent traits, as competing generational value-oriented identities will be elaborated on in this chapter.

1.2 National Identities: Imagined Communities

Nations are an imagined political community, a cultural construct born out of specific historical conditions. According to Anderson (1983), print capitalism, defined as the mass production of books and newspapers, now replaced by modern-day media networks, has played a crucial role in shaping collective identities. By enabling individuals to consume the same news and narratives simultaneously, this has created a sense of shared experience which permits individuals to imagine themselves as part of a broader national community (Anderson, 1983). These narratives, often repetitive and symbolic, contribute to an 'imagined simultaneity' reinforcing the illusion of national unity.

In the context of Brexit, Anderson's theory provides a useful lens through which to view the generational divide regarding national identity. As this thesis will analyse, older generations drew on nostalgic visions of Britain's past and consumed different media sources to young counterparts. Older voters appeared to be invested in a more 'traditional' imagined community, encompassing British 'values'. In modern day Britain, this is characterised by hostility to immigration and its societal impacts, and a desire to 'reclaim control' from outsiders, or from Brussels.

In contrast, younger voters, who predominantly supported Remain, tended to express a hybrid and cosmopolitan identity that included both *Britishness* and

Europeanness, along with other identities (Sloam and Henn, 2019). This enforces an idea of competing imagined communities, shaped by distinct generational experiences and values. Other theorists deepen this analysis. Gellner (1983) contends that nationalism is the product of industrial society, that the nation is a functional response to modernity, not an organic community, supporting the idea that Brexit-era nationalism may represent a reactive effort to preserve older modes of identity in the face of social and economic change.

Similarly, Hobsbawm (1990) argues that many national traditions are "invented", created to legitimise political power and foster social cohesion. Symbols like the Union Jack were invoked during the Brexit campaign and drawn into identity discourses surrounding national sovereignty and unity. Furthermore, identity is a production, an ongoing process shaped by historical positioning (Hall, 1990). Hall's notion of cultural hybridity is especially useful for understanding younger voters who reject singular national identities in favour of transnational ones. Brexit is therefore also a conflict between fixed and fluid identities. As identity is constantly forming and changing, this perspective is relevant when assessing the impact of Brexit as a mass event on the formation of youth identities in the UK.

British and English National Identities

Britain has a distinct constitutional history. Unlike other nations founded on ideology or revolution, Britain's uncodified constitution was developed over several centuries. *Britishness* arguably materialised in a response to German attacks in the Second World War, where identity became 'what we stand for' (Palmer, 2023). Brexit, on the other hand, is internal; a "self inflicted wound" which makes it such an important event in identity construction (Palmer, 2023, p36), as it has become a marker of internal fragmentation.

References to a collective British identity can be problematic, as they often obscure the distinct and deeply rooted national and regional identities within the UK (Palmer, 2021). Tension thus arises in defining English identity, perceived as distinct from

British identity. Defining English identity has long posed a challenge. As Scruton (2004, cited in Ferdjani, 2022) observes, “What was England: a nation? A territory? A language? A culture? An empire? An idea? All answers seem inadequate.”

This ambiguity stems in part from England’s central role in the British Empire, where Englishness was absorbed into a broader imperial identity. As a multi-national federation and a multi-ethnic empire, national understanding has long been blurred (Ferdjani, 2022). The legacy of this imperial history continues to shape unsettled identities in the UK, manifested through Brexit.

Expressions of English nationalism, such as preferences for the English flag over the Union Jack, often signal a cultural orientation which “looks back to our imperial past” (Kenny cited in Ferdjand, 2022). Symbolic choices reveal how some forms of English identity are grounded in nostalgia and a desire to reclaim a national character which, concerning Brexit, many Leave voters felt had been eroded.

This has led to scholars claiming Brexit was “made in England” (Palmer, 2021) with nationalist attributes. “When you strip away the rhetoric, Brexit is an English nationalist movement” claimed a *Guardian* journalist in 2016 (O’Toole, 2016). This rhetoric has solidified into the way English identity is formed and perceived today: “With Brexit, we see the formation of a new English identity which is nationalist, anti-EU and which regards foreigners as a threat” (Ferdjani, 2022).

Moreover, asymmetric devolution in the UK contributed to this identity crisis. Unlike Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, England lacks its own devolved parliament, which has arguably limited the development of a formal English political identity (Aughey, 2007). The English have thus been left with a dominant but undefined presence within the UK’s constitutional framework, leading to an identity void (Aughey, 2007). This asymmetry has further complicated the articulation of English nationalism in the post-imperial era, causing tensions which were revealed by Brexit.

1.3 European Identity: EU as a Normative Project

From a constructivist perspective, identity is fluid and can be hybrid, and thus European and national identities are able to coexist (Oborune, 2013). The concept of European identity is contested, somewhat abstract, and undoubtedly intentionally constructed. The European project holds an intentional normative vision encompassing peace, social welfare and human rights as a shared identity between culturally diverse member nations (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009).

The fact of being European and the assimilation of European values to develop an European identity can be also understood in relation to Anderson's work (1983), as like within nations, Europe is a larger 'imagined community,' as most people identifying as European "will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or eleven hear of them. Yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"(p6).

Theoretical literature on European integration includes a pluralist mix of research on multilevel governance, constructivism and institutionalism, bridging European institutions and sociological identity theory (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009; Hodson and Puetter, 2019). As it is difficult to incorporate identity into a neo-functionalist perspective, European identity, or a rejection of it, can be understood through a constructivist lens, formed by the invention of European values, as "Europe cannot be discovered, it must be invented" (Beck and Grande, 2007).

All national identities are political, but European identity is highly politicised as it cannot be separated from the European political project (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). It was theorised since the start of European integration that it would lead to the creation of a European identity, based on ideals of a social, prosperous and peaceful Europe. According to Wendt (1992, p417), through a constructivist lens the creation of cooperative institutions, in this case the European institutions, means "internalizing new understandings of self and other, of acquiring new identities". Wendt (1992) saw European identity as a constructivist outcome of four decades of cooperation in states self-interest.

In light of politicisation, European identity therefore arguably depends on the ability of European institutions to construct what it means to be European (Checkel and

Katzenstein, 2009), and account for the subsequent Europeanization of individuals; their collective identity and their belief systems (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009; Risse, 2010). The possibility of Europeanization, the effect of European integration onto citizens, understands identity as a positive sum game, with the coexistence of European and national identities (Oborune, 2013). In the Brexit case, it can be understood as a rejection of perceived European values by older generations.

1.4 Generational Identity

The generational gulf exposed by Brexit can be further understood through the lens of generational theory. Generational identity theory theorises that generational changes occur roughly every 20 years, shaped by events and circumstances (Barsallo et al., 2024). Mannheim (1952) argued that generations are shaped by their shared experience, as identity is derived from socialisation (Anderson, 1983). This helps us understand why different generations voted differently in the referendum.

Building on this, Elder's (1998) life course perspective emphasises how historical contexts intersect with individual development, particularly in adolescence and early adulthood, a stage when political beliefs and social values are still being formed. From this view, Brexit may be a personal event for young people, influencing their sense of national belonging. Unlike older generations shaped by the post-war consensus or Cold War tensions, Gen Z and Millenials have been socialised with a European identity and freedom of movement as normative and inherent experiences (Fox and Pearce, 2017). The disruption of these expectations by Brexit has therefore not only political but existential consequences.

Furthermore, for young people coming of age during the Brexit referendum and its aftermath, this political event may serve as a formative moment in their own generational identity, as Brexit might catalyse distinct political and cultural identities among younger people who largely opposed leaving the EU, which will be analysed in Part II of this thesis.

Generational conflict is also relevant to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which posits that people derive part of their self-concept from the social groups to which they belong. These groups are not only sources of belonging but also of exclusion, as identity is formed through in-group and out-group distinctions. The generational dimension demonstrates further polarisation of these boundaries, showing a pattern older and younger voters mutually othering one another based on competing values.

Summary

This chapter situates the thesis in a constructivist approach, arguing that the Brexit vote must be read through the lens of socially constructed identities. It outlines how national, European, and generational identities function as “imagined communities," where meanings of identity shift through discourse and lived experience. The chapter shows that Brexit juxtaposed a nostalgic, sovereignty-centred Englishness, strongest among older voters, with the hybrid, cosmopolitan identities of a generation shaped by freedom of movement. Drawing on theories of Europeanisation, invented tradition, and generational socialisation, it concludes that Brexit was fundamentally a clash of contrasting identities, positioning identity rather than economics as the key variable for the analysis that follows.

Chapter Two: Brexit as an Identity Conflict

From the Brexit debate, whilst playing on traditional British and English identities, emerged two new distinct ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ political identities, which cut across traditional party lines. Due to the value-led orientation of these identities, those who argued for and against Brexit were arguably in conflict. The conflict took place between binary and polarised distinctions: ‘Leavers’ and ‘Remainers’ (Palmer, 2021; Tilley and Hobolt, 2023). The emergence of the ‘Leaver’ identity is under the umbrella of nationalism, a new in-group. Tilley and Hobolt (2023) note that events of political crisis can lead to the formation of new identities, which can persist to affect the future political landscape.

2.1 Brexit Identities: Leavers and Remainers

The ‘Leaver’ identity links to strong national identities and a rejection of multicultural Britain. The increasingly antagonistic tone of political discourse since the Brexit referendum suggests a narrowing ‘in-group’ identity. As Sobolewska and Ford argue, the focus has shifted from broad Leave support to a more ideologically defined group of “identity conservatives.” Similarly, concepts of “Somewheres" and “Anuwheres” also captures culturally rooted and exclusionary identities (White, 2023). “Somewheres” are typically older, less formally educated individuals with socially conservative values, often rooted in rural or local communities and more likely to have supported Leave. In contrast, “Anywheres” are younger, university-educated, socially liberal, and cosmopolitan in outlook, and were more likely to have voted Remain (Sczepanski, 2023; White, 2023). Brexit thus created out-group animosity and discrimination (Tilley and Hobolt, 2023) with the generational gap showing a strong correlation to these emerged identities.

2.2 Empirical Evidence for an Identity-Driven Vote

Identity over Economics?

This section will first analyse empirical evidence for the case of identity as the most important factor behind Brexit. Tilley and Hobolt (2023) categorise the main three most

pressing issues facing Great Britain leading up to the referendum; immigration, the economy, and the National Health Service. When examining public opinion at this time, although these three issues are most salient and were all addressed in Brexit campaigning.

A YouGov end of year survey conducted in 2015, less than one year before the Brexit referendum, found that from a sample of the population, 63 per cent selected immigration as the number one pressing issue facing Britain, whereas healthcare was far behind with just 39 per cent, and the economy 33 per cent (Clarke et al, 2017).

The generational gap on this issue is clear. Studies by Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley (2017) show the generational divide in attitudes toward immigration played a significant role in shaping voting behaviour. Their analysis shows that 68 per cent of pensioners selected securing the right to reduce immigration to be “very important," compared to only 24 per cent of 18 to 24-year olds. Similarly, 73 per cent of pensioners viewed limiting EU workers' access to welfare benefits as a priority, while just 26 per cent of young people felt the same. Furthermore, there were no notable perceived differences between Leavers and Remainers on economic policy (Tilley and Hobolt, 2023). However, substantial perceived divides emerged in relation to social liberalism, immigration and identity.

This result therefore primarily derives from an anxiety on the effect of immigration and its impact on Britain’s culture. Brubaker notes that identity often becomes most salient during moments of perceived threat or rupture (1996; 2000), echoed in concern for high rates of immigration, as shared by 93 per cent of voters who said they were planning to vote Leave (Clarke et al., 2017).

Furthermore, a study by the Intergenerational Foundation (Kingman, 2017) found that holding a “Very strongly European” national identity, being educated to University level, and living in Scotland were the main variables associated with higher odds of voting Remain. Conversely, having no educational qualifications, being White British, and holding a “very strongly British” identity were the largest predictors of Leave voting. Each of these factors signals identity, a group who feel they have been ‘left

behind' (Kingman, 2017). Sovereignty and patriotism had more damaging consequences, arguably they "veiled a stain of xenophobia" (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016, p26).

Identity: the New Dividing Line of British Politics

As stated before, Brexit identities were value-orientated. "Playing the identity card" allowed the Leave campaign to cut across traditional party lines, mobilising support across both left and right (Tournier-Sol, 2023). However, the author observes that this pattern does not extend to the cultural dimension, where "substantial differences between Remainers and Leavers" persist even within shared party identities. In particular, Remainers are described as being "consistently more socially liberal than Leavers," a divide that holds true among both Labour and Conservative partisans. This enduring cultural divide reinforces the argument that Brexit was not simply a political or economic choice, but a fundamentally identity-driven outcome, as the cultural dimension was prevalent in affecting how people voted.

To deepen this analysis, recent data from the National Centre for Social Research (Curtice and Scholes, 2024) found cultural identity has become one of the most powerful dividing lines in British politics. The report highlights a 33 point gap in support for the Conservatives and Reform UK (UKIP) between individuals who believe that migrants undermine British culture and those who believe migrants enrich it. Amongst Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Green Party supporters, the gap moves in the opposite direction and is even wider, at 48 percentage points. Crucially, these cultural cleavages have deepened over time. In 2015, the equivalent gaps were just 16 and 21 points respectively. This shift indicates a growing polarisation around questions of national identity and migration, suggesting that cultural attitudes increasingly shape political alignment in the UK.

This thesis argues that the generational divide reveals identity, or rather a crisis of identity, as the main driver of the Brexit result. This is reaffirmed by almost half (49 per cent) of Leave voters claiming their biggest single reason for wanting to leave the EU

was “the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK”. One third (33 per cent) said the main reason was that leaving “offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders.” In comparison, just 6 per cent identified economic benefits as their principal concern. (National Centre for Social Research, 2024). These findings further suggest the Brexit vote was shaped less by material or policy-based considerations and more by questions of sovereignty and national identity, and perceived cultural threat.

Overarching above explanations for the referendum result is rooted in economic and cultural concerns lies a phenomena feared and understood by older and younger generations respectively. Globalisation has changed the way societies function, which Ferdjani (2022) argues is the basis for crises of identity. The gulf between ‘Remainers’ and ‘Leavers’ has also been understood as the winners and losers of globalisation, as many who voted to remain live in multicultural urban areas such as London, whereas working class in rural areas felt left behind (Ferdjani, 2022; Finlay et al., 2020).

Similar polarisation appears in relation to national pride. Those who are “very proud” of Britain’s history are now 40 percentage points more likely to support the Conservatives or Reform UK than those who are “not very” or “not at all” proud, a dramatic increase from 21 points in 2013 (National Centre for Social Research, 2024). Among left-leaning parties, the trend is mirrored: individuals who are less proud of Britain’s history are 41 points more likely to back Labour, the Liberal Democrats or the Greens, up from 20 points in 2013 (National Centre for Social Research, 2024).

Overall, through analysing voting trends we understand how identity drove the Brexit vote. This matches the thesis that motivations behind Brexit was “more [driven] by cultural loss, related to immigration and ethnic change, than by economic calculation” (Tournier−Sol, 2023).

Exceptionalism and Euroscepticism

To evaluate the historical dimension, none of the argumentation against the UK’s EU membership was new. Brexit has often been linked back to historical ideas of

British exceptionalism rooted in the past of the British empire, translated into modern day British Euroscepticism (Carl & Dennison, 2018).

In 1975, Britons were asked to vote on whether to stay in the then European Economic Community (EEC), and since then, faced repeated asks from British politicians to withdraw (Glencross, 2014). Glencross (2014) argues that British Euroscepticism towards European integration is a manifestation of British exceptionalism, contradicting the “European ideal of ever closer union”. Brexit is an outcome of this exceptionalism mindset, of a certain British superiority intersecting with island nation attitudes and geographic disconnection (Galpin, 2023; Glencross, 2014). Glencross (2014) thus called the four-decades long seemingly never-ending debate on EU membership a “neverendum.”

Britain is not alone in its scepticism for the Union. The European project intended to “de-politicize politics," and for decades, enlargement, the single market, and the euro were created in a technocratic manner, as Europe was in a state of permissive consensus from a general indifference to the European polity (Checkel and Katznstein, 2009), yet the UK has always shown greater skepticism manifested through a series of opt-outs (George, 1998).

Pimor (2021) therefore asks the question of wether due to this Eurosceptic history, Brexit was inevitable. The UK was not a founding member of the Union, was declined membership in 1946, leading to a historically ambiguous relationship fuelled by exceptionalism. When the UK finally joined the EU in 1973, it had missed the opportunity to influence the creation of European institutions in its own favour (Nairn, 2003). In his book *The Break-Up of Britain* (2003) Nairn also comments on the future inevitability of fraction with increased globalisation. Although predicting an internal break up of Britain, his theory applies to the European Union in the case of Brexit, and with the large divides in society exposed by Brexit. However, Brexit was campaigned on cultural grounds, and therefore represents an exit from the *construct* of the European Union (Pimor, 2021).

2.3 Generational Conflict: Competing Identities

This section will investigate the aforementioned evidence in regard to the generational divide in voting behaviour. According to constructivism, “Communities are constructed through the unification of a common perception of culture, history, politics and are often linked to certain community symbols” (Albinger, 2020, p5), which is translated into generational similarities in political behaviour.

Older Voters

The tipping point around age-related responses seems to be around the mid-40s, as from that age onwards a majority of adults voted Leave (Finlay et al., 2020). This stems from both modern and historical factors.

Firstly, as mentioned in the previous section, the UK has shown a long standing hostility to federalism and to the European project of integration, which has always challenged the doctrine of “unitary and exclusive state sovereignty” (Keating, 2004). Europe integration, for some, therefore symbolised imperial decline (Galpin, 2024). Paul Gilroy (2004) depicts this as ‘postcolonial melancholia,' where Britain’s unmourned attachment to Empire is denied (Finlay net al., 2020). Support from older generations is thus understood partly as a reaction to this loss of sovereignty. As stated before, almost half of Leave voters said their main reason for voting to leave was “decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK” (Ashcroft, 2016). This strongly suggests that the Leave vote was driven more by sovereignty and identity, reinforcing the argument that Brexit functioned as an identity crisis rather than a rational economic decision.

Secondly, society in the UK has transformed rapidly over the past half century, through mass immigration and an ageing population (McNeil and Haberstroh, 2022). Concern for immigration was a higher concern for older voters than for younger voters. Heath et al., (2024) writes “UKIP appealed to older, white voters who had grown up during a time when the country was almost exclusively white and most people would have had limited contact with migrants or people from other countries”. In their support

for Brexit, older generations show a link between globalisation-led societal change, and a sense that national identity was being eroded (Evans and Joshi, 2019) .

For Nairn (2003), these narratives show globalism as synonymous with British decline and fragmentation. According to the National Centre for Social Research, British people in general are less likely to except national pride than before. In 2013, 86 per cent said they "were proud of Britain's history" which has fallen to 64 per cent in 2024 (Curtice and Scholes, 2024). In the 2000s, socio-economic change meant that the older order of British society had "mostly disappeared" due to American-led globalisation, and in this way older generations voting for Brexit is a manifestation of this powerlessness, and a perceived loss of British values.

Younger Voters

The Brexit vote came in a period coined by Sloam and Henn (2019) as a 'Youthquake'; an eruption of youth political engagement. Both the 2016 Referendum and the 2017 General Election saw a boom in youth turnout, following a period of low electoral turnout, typically attributed to a disengaged Gen Z. One theory of youth participation useful for understanding the Brexit case is Amnå and Ekman's (2014) idea of the 'stand by citizen', where the political participation and decision making of young people at the ballot box is determined on a case-by-case basis, participating most actively in an "issue that challenges an individual's sense of collective identity" (Sloam and Henn, 2019). High youth turnout in the referendum thus signals young people felt they had something to lose.

This thesis previously covered the hostility of older generations towards immigration. By contrast, Gen Z and today's youth have been raised and familiarised in an era of globalisation, often embracing multiculturalism, showing more positive attitudes towards immigration. Furthermore, young people on average have a higher level of education with more young people attending university than ever before, and are less likely to be married by age 20 (Inglehart and Wezel, 2005; Sloam and Henn, 2019). Sloam and Henn (2019, p11) label this group as the "cosmopolitan left" citizens

of the UK, characterised and defined by acceptance of and adaptation to globalisation, and in strong opposition to religious fundamentalism and nationalism (Fox and Pearce, 2017). Young people are also more likely to have a hybrid identity, proven by their preference to remain in the EU. This helps us understand why the youth were more pro-EU than their older counterparts: "people with a special focus on their national identity mostly voted to leave the EU whilst people with a perceived dual national identity of seeing themselves as both British and European were essentially remain-voters" (Albinger, 2020, p3).

In addition, younger people are driven by empathy and solidarity showing different values to other generations, intersecting identity, territory and temporality (Barsallo, 2024) However, young voters are of course not homogenous. There are large correlations between those with high educational attainment and those who show favourable views to European identity (Sloam and Henn, 2019)

The idea of the 'left behind' group discussed in relation to older generations who viewed European integration as a loss of sovereignty or control, linked to a more hostile view of a new, multicultural Britain, is not clear cut. Although young people did mainly support Remain, a group of young voters also supported Brexit, often from lower socio-economic backgrounds or lower levels of education.

In summary, the gaps on identity perception and creation between generations are clear. Having discussed older and younger identities in the UK, it is clear why these key differences led to such a gap concerning Brexit; differences in acceptance or opposition to globalisation, views on immigration and freedom of movement.

2.3 Brexit Campaign and Media Narratives

Media and Motivated Reasoning

This section will discuss key narratives repeated throughout Brexit campaigning, which indicate the vote was driven by identity concerns of older generations. Rhetorical strategies are paramount in politics. Rhetoric methods appeal to *pathos* and *logos:* emotion and logic (White, 2023) to persuade voters. Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA)

as a methodological approach that centres on the rhetorical situation. Through the 'motivated reasoning' paradigm and confirmation bias, confirms citizens resist information inconsistent with their beliefs and values and seek information which confirms them (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016).

The political battle between Leave and Remain sides took place in the media, notably on social media channels which played a crucial role in shaping the outcome. Social media has become the second most important place people discover news online (Newman et al., 2016). A 2015 Ofcom report found 43 per cent of those who get news online, receive it through social media. The figure rises to 61 per cent among 16-24 year olds, 16 per cent of whom rely exclusively on social media for news (Ofcom, 2017).

Polarisation in the UK on the Brexit debate is seen by many as a symptom of algorithms on platforms which show users content congenial to their existing views, combined with an informational environment tailored by each user to their interests or opinions (Bauchowitz and Hänska, 2017).

Media Framing of Immigration

The role of the media, notably the tabloid press had long established immigration as a key issue through decades of reporting. Immigration far exceeded economic issues in media coverage in Brexit campaigning (Sloam and Henn, 2016). In addition, media discourse on the EU had been historically exclusively negative, portraying the EU in conflict with the UK without offering a counter point of social and economic benefits of the Union. For the other side therefore, the Remain camp was left with little cultural capital to mount a persuasive emotional case for continued membership (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016).

Of 1558 news articles published during the campaign analysed by *Young people in a changing Europe: British youth and Brexit* (2016), 41 per cent of articles were pro-Leave, and only 27 per cent were in favour of staying in the EU. Furthermore, with pro-Leave articles focused mainly on migration, security and sovereignty. This demonstrates

how the media focused on identity concerns driven by fear of migration, rather than economic rationale, signalling a preference of *pathos* over *logos*.

Generational and Regional Differences in Media Consumption

Age played a significant role in shaping both media consumption and voting behaviour in the Brexit referendum which further explains generational polarisation. Traditional print newspapers remain far more popular among older demographics; data on UK media habits indicates that only around 29 per cent of those aged 15 to 24 read print newspapers, compared to nearly 68 per cent of those over 65. This generational divide in media exposure may have contributed to differing perspectives on the EU.

According to a post-referendum survey conducted by Lord Ashcroft, older voters not only tended to support Leave in greater numbers, but also turned out to vote at higher rates than younger cohorts (Sloam and Henn, 2016), when also considering the numbers of young people engaged in politics but too young to vote, it is evident how pro-Leave media mobilised and targeted the age divide to produce the result. As for the Remain campaign, their argument that EU membership enhanced sovereignty lacked the "excitement of challenging the prevailing order" (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016, p21).

With the Brexit question, the response of Wales, Ireland and Scotland differed to that of England, showing a different interpretation of their identification in relation to Europe. Although England and Wales both voted Leave by 53 per cent, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted remain at 62 per cent and 56 per cent respectively (Keating, 2021), and all nationalist parties supported Remain in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The immigration question was framed more positively in Scotland, where it was understood across political parties that immigration to Scotland was necessary for economic reasons (Smellie, 2024). Furthermore, in Wales and Northern Ireland freedom of movement for economic migrants was seen as necessary for the economy, whereas in Ireland it was viewed that EU membership reduced dependence on the UK, and freedom

of movement for workers was broadly supported by Wales and Northern Ireland (Keating, 2021).

Identity Discourse in Campaigning

The leave campaign capitalised on identity and loss, underpinned by right-wing populist discourse (McNeil and Maberstroh, 2022). Firstly, the slogan "Take Back Control" encapsulates the Leave's camp affinity with themes of nostalgia, sovereignty and identity (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016). Taking *back* control quite literally refers to a imagined past of British absolute sovereignty that younger voters have not lived and will most likely not remember. The appeal of this slogan to voters' *Pathos* was also striking, resonating powerfully with voters who felt their lives were no longer under their own control. As Robertson (2021) claims, Vote Leave crafted an extremely emotive message playing on fears of lost agency, encouraging people to see Brexit not just as political change but as reclaiming their own lives.

This slogan became the cornerstone of the Leave campaign, repeated at every opportunity (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016) and as shown by voting behaviours, it resonated most powerfully with older generations. Although ambiguous it was mainly received as a call to 'take back control of our money, laws and borders' (Keating, 2021). For many of these voters, it evoked a call for national sovereignty, a yearning for a remembered or imagined Britain, along with a rejection of Brussels supranational decision-making.

Secondly, some of the striking identity-driven media coverage includes false claims from *The Sun* that the Queen supported Brexit (Sloam and Henn, 2019), used by Leave to boost patriotic message drawing on the most important symbol of British identity, appealing thus to older voters (Sloam and Henn. 2016). Another Facebook ad linked to the Leave website and stated "the European Union wants to kill our cuppa" (Meek, 2018), portraying Brussels as a threat to every day life and to classic British culture.

Fear of immigration was evident throughout the campaign. An early 'Go Home' billboard van was trialled in London to urge 'undocumented immigrants' to leave the

UK (Finlay et al., 2020). Furthermore, through UKIP's vote Leave election broadcast of "mostly non-white bodies" queuing up at the British border shows xenophobia and fear-mongering as intrinsic to the debate (Finlay et al., 2020). The murder of Remainer MP Joe Cox during the campaign demonstrates the power of this rhetoric, at the most extreme level (Meek, 2018).

Furthermore, Boris Johnson's Leave campaign bus as a publicity stunt epitomised this strategy. The bus displayed on its side "every week we send £350 million to the EU, enough to build a new NHS hospital every 7 days" (Shaw, 2019) combining economic concern with health-service nationalism; although promptly debunked, it prioritised *pathos* over *logos* and became one of the most famous claims of the Leave side.

The Leave media campaign included specific targeting via social media platforms. Adverts and graphics appearing on social media sites in the weeks leading up to the election included an image of supposedly immigrants lining up at a border, with the caption "Turkey is going to join the EU" representing the threat of 76 million Turks joining the EU and coming to the UK (which would be the whole of the Turkey population). The use of misinformation and racially coded imagery raised concerns about democratic legitimacy and since deepened disillusionment of younger generations with British identity (Finlay et al., 2020; Shaw, 2019).

For older generations, a link between 'patriotism' for tradition and hostility or fear towards immigrants was capitalised on by the Leave campaign and the right (Tournier-Sol, 2023). Globalisation had long been a narrative which "intersects with British decline and fragmentation" (Nairn, 2003 p18). Ferdjani (2022) acclaims this to a loss of institutions and traditions, famously exemplified in William Hague's 'Foreign Land' speech, in which he calls modern England "a foreign country" (Ferdjani, 2019). In this sense, Brexit was thus the symptom of a long process where "the English progressively felt they were losing their country" to immigration, and subsequently felt their history and tradition was being suppressed. Arguably, campaigning based on immigration, with values of sovereignty and patriotism a "veiled stain of xenophobia" (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016)

Summary

To summarise, Part I of this thesis analysed key identity theory, in order to frame the hypothesis that Brexit was a an identity-driven event. Analysis of rhetoric and campaigning helps to understand that Brexit was campaigned on identity grounds, and from this base, we can understand why Brexit may have real effects on identity formation. The Leave campaign did not just reflect existing identities but also actively constructed and reinforced them, through repetition and fear-based appeals to emotion. Through a constructivist lens, we see how this shows a narrative constructed over time and utilised by the Leave campaign, drawing on a generational sense of self. Overall, we see the referendum result also as a process of political socialisation through the media where voters were exposed repetitively to messaging, paired with hostility towards the impact of immigration on British values and ideals.

Part II: Post-Brexit Impact on Youth Identity: A Thematic Analysis

Chapter Three: Post-Brexit Attitudes and Identity Shifts

As argued in the first part of this thesis, theories of identity construction, notably generational and national identity, are useful for understanding how young people relate to Brexit as a formative event, and what the referendum shows about unsettled and competing identities between generations. Part II of this thesis thus analyses both empirical and secondary data alongside interviews to understand the consequent impact of Brexit on youth identity formation, and how this is manifested today in an increasingly fractured UK political landscape.

Most recently in 2025, 60 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds stated they would vote to rejoin the EU, compared to the 32 per cent average of the overall population who prefer to stay out (Curtice, 2025). As discussed before, youth turnout in the referendum saw a significant rise compared to the previous general election. Youth turnout was estimated as high as 72 per cent, marking a substantial increase from the 43 per cent turnout of the same age group in the 2015 general election (Yeginsu, 2017), which indicates an immediate reaction to a topic which young people saw as important to them, manifested through maintained increased political engagement.

3.1 Political Sidelining and Resentment

Effects of Brexit as a shock event were quickly politically visible. This section will discuss what this increased youth political engagement tells us about identity, in the context of increased economic insecurity for young people in post-Brexit Britain.

Firstly, Yeginsu (2017) attributes the 2017 hung parliament result as of youth frustration post Brexit, which led to more than one million under 25 registering to vote in the 2017 snap election. “Our young have suffered disproportionately these past few years: student debt, a housing crisis, a lack of secure jobs, falling wages, cuts to social security” (Yeginsu, 2017). Furthermore, In 2019, 46 per cent of young people surveyed said events relating to Brexit had made them more likely to vote (Jack Petchey

Foundation, 2019). Ultimately, this portrays a desire of young actors to reclaim their future and reassert their agency in post-Brexit Britain.

Young Brits overwhelmingly believe that leaving the UK was a national miscalculation. 75 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds, according to a YouGov January 2025 poll (Difford, 2025b), feel Britain was wrong to leave the European Union. This is extended to 67 per cent of 25 to 49 year olds who also regret the decision. This contrasts to the older generations, among which a 55 per cent majority of those aged 65 or over in 2025 maintain that Brexit was the right decision. Sentiments of the younger generation are seemingly shared across the population in the aftermath, with just 11 per cent of Brits in 2025 seeing Brexit as more of a success than a failure (Difford, 2025b).

'Brexit remorse' entered discussion immediately following the referendum result, with demands for a second referendum due to misinformation from the Leave campaign (Clarke et al, 2017), and sentiments of regret have persisted. In 2024, the UK General Election further provided fresh insight into the political orientation of young voters in a post-Brexit Britain. 40 per cent of male and 42 per cent of female 18 to 24 year olds voted Labour, compared to just 10 per cent of young men and 6 per cent of young women voting for the Conservative Party (McDonnell, 2024).

Furthermore, 72 per cent of those who voted Labour in 2024 said they would vote to rejoin the EU (Curtice, 2024b). This demonstrates that Labour is the more viable pro-EU option, and the Party has consequently seen the most support from youth categories since the 2016 referendum.

Sentiments that the UK was wrong to leave the EU are reflected in interviews. "I think Brexit was a bad thing, for lots and lots of reasons." Many young people reaffirmed their commitment to the European Union, expressing regret over the referendum result. All those interviewed said they would vote Remain today, and all said they believed Brexit had overall been "a bad thing" for Britain. As one interviewee stated when asked how they would vote in a referendum to rejoin the EU, "I would vote Remain in a heartbeat." From this empirical and emotional evidence, it can be affirmed

that a majority of young people thus recognise the consequences of leaving the EU as overall negative for the country.

This further demonstrates that although many young people were too young to vote in the original referendum, their retrospective understanding of the benefits of European citizenship has matured. Unlike older generations, they were not socialised during European integration, yet many now articulate the benefits of EU membership in terms of international influence, prosperity, and personal opportunity; “the war in Ukraine shows that we are stronger together”.

Strong reactions amongst those who were too young to vote in the referendum can be attributed to what Lee et al. (2024) name a political sidelining, an exclusion from Brexit voting and from the subsequent negotiation process. Many of the young people examined in this thesis, who were too young to vote, show especially critical attitudes towards Brexit and its social, economic and cultural implications (Curtice, 2025). This presents a paradox, they will be the “inheritors of a post-Brexit nation," yet they were disenfranchised from the vote, as the franchise was not extended to 16 and 17 year olds, unlike in the Scottish Independence Referendum (Finlay et al., 2020, p17).

The exclusion of young people from the Brexit vote and subsequent negotiations has not only led to political disillusionment but also positioned them within a state of *liminality*. From a geographical and sociopolitical perspective, liminality refers to the experience of occupying an in-between space, neither completely a child or an adult (Lee et al., 2024). In the case of Brexit, young citizens exist in a transitional space regarding political autonomy: too young to have voted in 2016, yet disproportionately affected by the consequences. This is useful to understand identity shifts and increased political participation post-Brexit, as these in-between spaces are often sites of resistance (Lee et al., 2024). These sentiments support a constructivist understanding of identity as dynamic and contingent.

Interview data illustrates this sentiment. One 26 year old from Middlesbrough explained “I was 17 at the time, so I couldn’t vote. But now, with hindsight, I would have voted Remain”. Another, aged 24, reflected: “I didn’t get to vote, but I feel like a

part of my identity was taken away without my say." A Jack Petchey Foundation (2019) survey of over 6,000 young people found that three years after the vote 80 per cent of young people thought politicians "had not listened to their views on Brexit" (Jack Petchey Foundation, 2019). Brexit was therefore a formative political event which has shaped generational consciousness.

Misinformation

Misinformation in the Leave campaign and on pro-Leave media was analysed in Part I. Interviewees now show resentment to persuasive arguments from the Leave campaign which "turned out to be fake," notably on promises on the NHS.

"The Leave campaign made promises that weren't true, like the NHS money. And yet, somehow, they were allowed to say it." Another interviewee from Scotland quoted "I think [Brexit] was one of the first times that lies in the media actually translated into a bad thing happening, because you could see lies in the media all the time".

As one interviewee from Birmingham, now 25, also mentioned claims of misinformation "I was too young to vote, and honestly I didn't know much about the EU back then. I remember vague stuff about the NHS and £350 million, but I didn't really understand what was true or not". This refers to one of the most infamous previously mentioned 'facts' of the campaign, claiming the UK sent £350 million to the EU each week, money which could instead go to the NHS (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016).

3.2 Changing British and European Identities

Britishness after Brexit

As outlined in the first section of this thesis, identity is socially constructed, often through understanding of how a group is critical of other groups. Through a constructivist lens, we understand how identities are reshaped constantly in Brexit discourse, political debates, media narratives and experiences since Brexit.

Scholars have hypothesised Brexit as an identity crisis which has impacted identity formation in the UK (Palmer, 2021). Interviews match the thesis that Brexit has influenced identity, with regards to how one “understands his/her sense of self generally and within the context of affiliation to a collective sense of nationness” (Palmer 2021).

Firstly, a strong majority those interviewed now associate at least in part a negative portrayal of British and English identities. All interviewees noted that their identity or feeling about *Britishness* had altered since Brexit. Symbols of what it means to be British, such as the monarchy or the Union Jack, were often mentioned in interviews when asked what British identity means to them, but with little emotional attachment. One 25 year old interviewee from Essex stated “When I hear British identity, I think of the Queen, Royal events, the Union Jack," and then when asked if they identify with these symbols, responded “not at all.” All interviewees mentioned celebration of national holidays and the Queen as intrinsic to British identities, and many commented how they are losing importance. “Celebrating national holidays such as St. George's Day, I believe that would be a very British thing to do. But that's not really a big thing here” stated a 26 year old from Manchester, demonstrating a disengagement of young people from patriotic symbolism. As Calhoun (2017) argues, in times of political rupture, everyday symbols become charged with nationalist meaning” which was evident in Leave media campaigning analysed in Part I, which may contribute to this rejection. Part I of this thesis investigated how Brexit, campaigned on identity grounds, has become somewhat synonymous with nationalism.

Accordingly, young people interviewed also brought up how being British now holds external negative connotations, as they expressed concern over how EU citizens now view Brits in reflection of Brexit. One interviewee from Birmingham remarked they now feel embarrassment when travelling abroad to tell people they meet that they are from the UK, as they think Brexit will be the first thing they will be associated with. Other respondents remarked “there’s a lot of misconceptions in the EU with how people think British people perceive them," and another “I also have gained some unease with my identity, what that represents to me and also what Britishness represents to other people,” further linking to lasting nationalist currents to Brexit rhetoric.

Secondly, this thesis covered constructed Brexit identities; ‘Leavers’ and ‘Remainers’. Although no longer often discussed in reference to British politics, a binary divide remains (Curtice, 2020; Ford and Goodwin, 2017). “[Brexit] has divided the country quite heavily… there’s clearly now two categories of people in this country that have been divided by this issue”. One interviewee remarked: "I think I have become less proud to be British, especially with the rise of the extreme right.”

We see thus a persistence of the Brexit in-group and out-group which is still affecting identity formation. This statement reflects a broader trend in youth political consciousness, whereby Brexit is not seen as a closed chapter but rather as a pivot toward a new landscape of cultural conflict. “It's affected my views of British identity. It's saddened me.” The growth of parties such as Reform UK illustrates that while the Brexit vote itself has passed, the debates it sparked around nationalism, immigration, sovereignty, and identity continue to shape political identities. A particularly emotional response to the impact of Brexit from an interviewee was that: “everything that young people should aspire to be actually has been destroyed by the image of Brexit”.

Overall, attitudes of young people in Britain supports the argument by Sobolewska and Ford (2020) that post-Brexit Britain is experiencing an enduring form of identity crisis, where cultural and political values now define voting behaviour more than traditional party lines. The young people interviewed for this thesis often expressed discomfort with what they perceive as a backlash against multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, components of their identity. The persistence of these divides shows that, rather than dissolving after the referendum, new identity fault lines have emerged.

Other National Identities

Brexit also reignited questions about the unity of the United Kingdom itself. Nowhere is this more evident than in Scotland, which voted decisively to remain in the EU, with 62 per cent of voters supporting Remain in 2016 (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016). This outcome marked a stark divergence from the overall UK vote and has since fuelled debates around Scottish independence. Brexit accelerated possible independence

of Scotland with hopes of possible accession to the EU (Lee et al, 2024), showing how Brexit as a catalyst for renewed national differentiation. Scotland wanted to remain in the EU, which has potentially led to further distancing themselves from British values.

For young Scots interviewed, the EU heightened disillusionment with Westminster politics, identifying the EU as more in line with their vision of an open, outward-looking nation. Institutionally, this repositioning is visible in the actions of the Scottish Government. In April 2025, it published a position paper advocating for a UK-EU youth mobility agreement, which explicitly acknowledges that such an agreement "will never fully replace the benefits that have been lost to young people through the ending of freedom of movement." The paper underlines Scotland's long history of emigration and recent demographic reliance on EU migration, framing Brexit as economically damaging and socially regressive. It calls for mobility not just as an economic tool, but as a cultural and identity-based necessity, a channel for building "lifelong links" and "mutual understanding" between young people across Europe (Scottish Government, 2025).

For those who identify as Scottish, they are even further away from British identities as Scotland voted to remain. As aforementioned, Scotland voted 62 per cent in favour of Remain (Jackson, Thorsen and Wring, 2016). One interviewee from Scotland spoke how she was even more in support of Scottish independence since Brexit. "I think the one big resentment towards Brexit for Scottish people is the fact that this Brexit referendum happened a year after the Scottish referendum", and when asked to what extent they aligned with British values, another Scottish student responded " I prefer the way Scotland is run as a country. It's a lot more progressive. So I feel like I like if I'm thinking about British politics and Scottish politics, I think I align more with that."

This links to how British identity is now perceived as exclusionary, leading some young people to express negative associations or feelings of embarrassment, thus meaning young people identify even less with British symbols. Brexit is therefore a cause and symptom of a fragmented political and cultural landscape within get EU, as

young people in Scotland reimagine their own national identities, with some rejecting Britishness in favour of the normative EU.

European Identity

The interviews conducted also focused on changing European identities. When asked about if they feel European, respondents showed positive associations and normative aspects to European identity but not all felt European themselves post-Brexit. “I feel like I want to, but I also don't feel like I can because of our departure from the EU”. One respondent who had worked in Spain as an English language teaching assistant for one year claimed “I always felt European and I still do feel European at heart. I am a European. The only thing that separates me from Europe is my passport”. Others actually stated they were in fact *more* European after Brexit, signalling a rejection of negative associations of British identity: “if anything, I feel more European now," “I think you want what you can’t have, and I feel jealous of my European friends and the freedom they have” stated a 23 year old from Glasgow.

Limiting freedom to work or study abroad is a key concern for interviewees. “I wanted to live in different EU countries since I was a little girl. That was always my dream because I loved learning languages”. Furthermore, not being able to live abroad, for example on self-employed respondent who despite learning Dutch has not been able to move to the Netherlands; “that means you can’t experience the culture or the language you’re interested in," or a respondent who has a already had to obtain multiple visas to do short work or study placements abroad, who now faces increased bureaucracy and costs of moving abroad.

We see therefore how British identity has now, for many young people who fit into the Sloam and Henn’s young cosmopolitan bracket (2019), now has a negative connotation largely relating to exceptionalism and anti-immigration rhetoric. Mintchev (2020) argues that racism was a central feature of Brexit discourse. Several scholars have argued that Brexit cannot be disentangled from its racial dynamics, with Sivanandan asserting “whatever else Brexit means or does not mean, it certainly means

racism" (quoted in Burnett, 2017, p.2). Therefore, the association of Brexit with xenophobia and racism contributed to a rejection of the nationalist narratives underpinning the Leave campaign.

Sentiments fit into Karl Mannheim's theory of Generational identity; that peoples identities are shaped by formative political and social events they experience as a generation. Many articulated a stronger connection to Europe. When asked what being European means, respondents invoked themes of language, multiculturalism, and openness. "[Europe is] about sharing, enriching each other's lives, about culture and language", another "when I think about Europe, I think about freedom". These findings support Social Identity Theory (Barsallo, 2024), which suggests that individuals seek to maintain positive group identities, particularly when their in-group is perceived as threatened or delegitimised. Broadly retaining support for the EU amongst young people, in this context, is understood as response to a threat to their cosmopolitan, pro-European image.

Exceptionalism and Generational Differences

Exceptionalism is translated through generations, young people say they do feel different to 'Europeans.' The differentiation of Europeans from Brits, and not including themselves in discussing 'Europeans' shows how othering and exceptionalism are rooted in British values, even for the more pro-EU generation. Some interviewees say they feel no difference, "I would consider myself more European than English". Interviewees were mindful of the intersection of identity and geography, acknowledging the UK's unique position as an island nation. Although still European, the UK is separated from mainland Europe along with no longer existing within the "cultural and spiritual unity" of the EU (Pimor, 2021).

Social identity theory tells us that identity bases itself from how members of a group see similarities and differences with others (Barsallo, 2024). Interviews conducted included a question prompting insight onto perceived generational differences: "There was a large difference in how older and younger generations voted. Why would you

think this is?" One interview reaffirmed the nostalgia of her grandmother to return to a Britain of the past, as living in London she had seen structural demographic changes from a high level immigration: "My grandmother strongly supported Leave and talked often about when her neighbours were also all white British people."

3.3 Youth Attitudes to European Integration

Travel and Mobility

Travel and mobility are 'inherent freedoms' of the EU, and essential to the development of a shared European consciousness on common values; "mobility, travel and tourism are essential factors in the development of a European consciousness shaped by common values and shared principles" (Pimor, 2021, p18).

Young people interviewed often brought up the consequences on opportunities abroad. For example, musicians have also been disproportionally affected. A 2023 survey by the ISM showed that due to Brexit almost half of UK musicians and music industry workers have had less work in the EU, and more than a quarter had none whatsoever (Healy, 2024). One interviewee works as a self-employed musician who who felt disproportionately affected by mobility restrictions. "If I had the chance, I would have already would have moved to the Netherlands for an extended period of time, but that is impossible now."

Secondly, interviewees also noted the effect of young European neighbours and friends leaving the UK after the referendum. One interviewee mentioned a Dutch friend who wanted to work in London after completing a Masters degree at the London School of Economics, but could no longer find a way to do so. London's dynamic feel has often been attributed to young Europeans living there, often heading to London for the relative ease of creating startups (De Freytas-Tamura, 2016), leading to a 'brain drain' from skilled EU workers returning to their home countries (Emerson, 2021). Another interviewee commented on their European friends who "now they didn't feel welcome anymore".

For those interviewed who were able to complete an exchange or mobility programme in Europe (Erasmus Plus or the replacement Turing Scheme), they showed a positive attitude towards European integration: “I don’t feel any different from the German or the Dutch”. This complements a study conducted by Oborune (2013), which found that for Sussex University graduates in the UK, 77 per cent of students who had completed an Erasmus programme felt they had an European identity, compared to a smaller majority of 59 per cent of students who had not completed a programme but had studied in the UK, contrasting to just 31 per cent of general UK population. This aligns on constructivist perceptive that having multiple identities is not a zero sum game (Oborune, 2013), and also demonstrates the effects of contact theory on identity, as travelling is hypothesised to foster mutual understanding and friendship (Pimor, 2021). Mobility can thus be understood as a core factor in European identity construction.

Of course, the long-term consequences of reduced mobility on identity formation will differ between a hard or soft UK reintegration. As debates on mobility scheme today have high momentum, it is the moment to assess if British people do not spend time living, studying or travelling Europe then, in reference to these findings and to contact theory, future generations will lose their European identity.

Immigration and the Economy

Young people in Britain today are focused on the fundamentals, higher wages, housing, and a better functioning health service. Low tuition fees abroad and the Erasmus Plus scheme are also a thing of the past (Emerson, 2021; Kingman, 2017).

When asked to rank the most important issues in the UK today, young people listed inflation and the cost of living first (41 per cent) (John Smith Center, 2025). It is therefore unsurprisingly that generally, young people brought up and commented on the adverse economic effects of Brexit: “for the economy it's been terrible because of the restrictions on trade and also the low quality migration that we get, and especially the limitations for trade, for business because it's been a bit of a nightmare.”

As analysed in Part I of this thesis, discourse on immigration as a threat to the UK's culture and identity was central to the Brexit debate. Given the centrality of immigration in the Brexit debate, analysing young people's attitudes is of especial importance (Finlay etc al.2020). As discussed in assessing youth identity in Part I of this thesis, younger voters tend to be more positive to immigration than older generations. In 2025, polling data from The Migration Observatory (2025) shows that younger people, especially those with university degrees, are less likely to say immigration is a very bad or bad thing. Only seven per cent of 18 to 24 year olds stated immigration is "very bad", compared to 23 per cent of those aged over 65.

Interestingly, not all interviewees who endorsed European integration also generally endorsed immigration, despite generally showing more positive attitudes towards migration and its benefits for the British economy. Polling shows a slim majority of young Brits still see the positives of immigration; 51 per cent agree "immigration has changed their communities for the better" opposed to 32 per cent who disagree, with the rest remaining neutral (John Smith Center, 2025). One respondent stated that multiculturalism is central to their perception of British identity; "Britain wouldn't be Britain without the richness of cultures that build it."

While immigration from the European Union has declined significantly, overall immigration to the UK has not decreased. In fact, it has shifted in composition. One interviewee noted "there has also been an increase of illegal immigration, rather than legal migration, which is not positive for the country". EU immigration fell from approximately 304,000 to 199,000 per year between 2015 and 2019, with emigration of EU nationals increasing from 86,000 to 151,000 during the same period (ONS, 2019). This decline was particularly pronounced among migrants from the EU8 countries, including Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania, where the UK's net gain dropped from around 80,000 in 2015 to near zero by mid-2019.

Conversely, net migration from non-EU countries has continued to rise, increasing from 164,000 to 229,000 within the same timeframe (ONS, 2019). This trend, which began in 2013, has been driven predominantly by a rise in immigration rather than a reduction in emigration. In other words, although Brexit may have succeeded in

reducing EU migration has not necessarily resulted in a net reduction in immigration overall. This discrepancy between expectation and outcome is particularly relevant in understanding how Brexit reshaped, but did not resolve concerns about immigration and control. “And that's, that's the sort of people that you don't necessarily want coming in your country. But because we've limited the amount of quality migration, the amount of unskilled low quality migration has skyrocketed and the, and the quality migration is flatlined. For some young interviewees, migrants from these countries were therefore perceived as more of a threat to Britain’s society as they are further from the UK’s perceived values and culture.

Summary

Ultimately, Brexit has catalysed both political disillusionment and identity transformation among young people in the UK. The findings align with constructivist and generational identity theories, suggesting that Brexit not only fractured political consensus but also triggered a deeper crisis of belonging for a generation who lost their EU citizenship. Youth attitudes towards European integration remain strong, particularly in relation to freedom of movement and mobility. Limitations on travel, work, and study abroad are frequently cited as among the most damaging aspects of Brexit. Despite this, views on immigration are more complex. While generally more open to immigration and multiculturalism than older generations, young people still express concerns about the changing composition of migration. Finally, this chapter also demonstrates a marked shift in how young people perceive *Britishness* and *Europeanness*, feeling resentment or negativity towards being British.

Chapter Four: Discussion and Political Implications of Identity Crisis

4.1 Gender Divides

The Brexit referendum itself did not display large divides in voting behaviour of young people based on gender. Younger women were least likely to vote Leave, 73 per cent of women aged 18 to 25 voted remain, compared to 67 per cent of men. However, there was no gender gap amongst those aged 36 and over, showing that although differences in gender were more defined for younger voters, they were minimal. However, in 2025, the gender gap is now amongst the clearest divisions within the younger generation (John Smith Center, 2025).

Reform UK and Young Men

The first part of this thesis mentioned the anomaly of the trend discovered in studies which coin the young generations as cosmopolitan, showing more sympathy to the benefits of migration and multiculturalism. The anomaly is young men, typically from a lower socioeconomic background (Sloam and Henn, 2019; John Smith Center, 2025), a demographic increasingly involved in new forms of populism in the UK. These fit the category of what is already known as the ‘left-behind’; “white British; lower levels of formal qualifications; extremely concerned about immigration; and a strong sense of national identity” (Emerson, 2021). Hinsliff (2025) notices that youth who feel disillusioned with traditional political parties would normally have looked to left-wing parties for alternatives, but in 2025 are instead becoming increasingly right-wing.

This thesis argued that the reform camp used media to capitalise from identity issues pressing the older generation, notably those around sovereignty and immigration, perceptions that Great Britain had lost its *greatness*. In interviews conducted for *The Guardian*, one 24 year old states Reform is the “only party standing up for British values," and another claims “I can look over the past and see a Great Britain. Today when I look around, I don’t” (Hinsliff, 2025).

This sentiment amongst the young male demographic is echoed in other democracies (Albinger, 2020; Hinsliff, 2025; John Smith Center, 2025). 2024's European elections saw almost one-third of French voters under 34 vote for France's far right party, National Rally. Leader Jordan Bardella and Nigel Farage are both increasingly popular on social media app TikTok. In the US, over half of under 29 men in the US voted for Donald Trump (Hinsliff, 2025).

As explored in the first section on this thesis, votes for anti-immigration party UKIP and for Brexit were identity-driven, concerned on immigration and a loss of British identity. However, this identity crisis is now also producing a shift towards right wing values in young demographics, transcending generations.

Therefore, in this new phenomenon, young people are also, in fact, longing for the perceived strength of a Britain of the past, yet, this is most likely a translation of disillusionment. For young men and boys, arguably now forming this group of the 'left behind' alongside older generations, this may be the cause they believe speaks out for them. Studies from the John Smith Center (2025) show how priorities for young people now are basic socio-economic needs, a generation that will struggle to match the wealth of their parents' generation: "everyday economic security has eclipsed abstract culture-war debates" (p6).

The 2024 General Election also exposed increasing gender differences. Almost twice as many women aged 19-24 voted Green then young men (23 per cent compared to 12 per cent). Conversely, young men were twice as likely to vote Reform UK (12 percent compared to 6 per cent) or Conservative (10 per cent contrasted with 6 percent) (McDonnell, 2024). In the May 2025 local elections held across England, Reform UK made huge gains, with 31 per cent of the vote and a majority in 10 areas (BBC, 2025). There is growing momentum among the youthful right. 26 per cent of young men report feeling warm toward the upstart rightwing Reform UK party, compared to 15 per cent of young women (John Smith Center, 2025).

The Green Party and Young Women

The Green Party, by contrast, has been more explicitly pro-European in its rhetoric. As one interviewee in this study noted. The Greens' support for climate cooperation, freedom of movement, and pan-European ecological frameworks aligns closely with the values of younger, internationalist voters, particularly those disillusioned by the cultural and economic fallout of Brexit.

Young people are by far the age category most likely to vote Green, with 18 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds voting Green in the 2024 election (McDonnell, 2024). The Green Party's appeal is symbolic of a broader cosmopolitan identity that young voters associate with the European project. From the 2024 election figures, a broader sympathy towards some form of European integration is concluded. Voting for Green however is now also heavily divided between genders, Almost a quarter of women aged 18 to 24 voted Green last July, roughly double the number of young men who voted Reform.

4.2 Consequences of Brexit

Post-Referendum Political Awareness

A recurring theme in interviews conducted for this thesis was the acknowledgement of increased political awareness and understanding of the EU among young people since the referendum. Brexit has led 72 per cent of young people to trust politicians less, according to the Jack Petchey Foundation (2019). Several interview respondents stated that, had they been eligible to vote in 2016, they might not have felt confident in doing so, not due to apathy, but due to a perceived lack of information, or misinformation, at the time. However, Brexit is no longer the priority of young people, who feel they now have more to contend with than their parents generation.

In 2019, 18 to 24 year olds ranked leaving the EU as the biggest issue to the UK. But in 2023, they rank first the economy, followed by health, housing, the environment, and immigration (Booth, 2023). According to YouGov polling, (Difford, 2025a) just 15 per cent of Gen Z Brits feel they "have greater financial security than their parents did at their age". Conversely, 43 feel they are less financially secure.

Political Consciousness and Further Identity Crisis

This perceived betrayal is manifested in three ways. Through high youth participation in subsequent elections, high youth support for the more pro-EU Labour party, and also through a turn towards Reform UK and a rejection of traditional politics. Is it therefore surprising that younger generations are disillusioned from the two parties and are reaching towards alternatives?

Whilst taking into account the defects of Brussels, Brexit has therefore perhaps acted as an accelerator of political consciousness. Studies from the John Smith Centre (2025) debunk representations of Gen Z as politically disinterested and disengaged, on the contrary, they are participating more than ever. In this sense, the referendum and its aftermath can be seen as a crucial political socialisation event, mirroring Karl Mannheim's theory of generational identity formation. Just as earlier generations were shaped by events such as the Cold War or Britain's entry into the EEC, so too is this generation being shaped by Brexit in different ways.

Brexit identities discussed in Part I have therefore lingered, and are impacting identity construction in the long-term. The 'Leave' and 'Remainer' identities created around the time of the referendum may no longer be prevalent in discourse, yet they manifest in modern day politics and disillusionment (Wilson, 2024). Brexit therefore is a symptom of a larger shift happening in British politics, where "people are tired of establishment politicians and mainstream political parties" (Islam, 2025), and searching for new answers to social and economic problems. On a larger scale, it proves the effect of Brexit on the UK as a whole as culture and identity issues dominate the political sphere (Curtice, 2024b):

> "It is often suggested that now that Brexit no longer dominates the political agenda that the battle for votes has reverted to being simply a contest between left and right. However, the terrain in which the parties are fighting is now a two-dimensional space in which issues of culture and identity, including Brexit, are as important as the divide between left and right".

Brexit, therefore, appears both a symptom and a cause of identity crisis in the UK, and the rise of Reform UK is a manifestation of this. Polls are showing that Reform UK are outperforming traditional political parties. Brexit has reshaped traditional party politics, and immigration remains firmly on the agenda (Curtice, 2024a; Wilson, 2024). Ford and Goodwin (2016) clam the UK's two party system is "crumbling".

Reform UK's official website states "Only Reform will stand up for British culture, identity and values. We will freeze immigration and stop the boats" (Reform UK, nd). This rhetoric capitalises on perceived cultural loss and securitisation of identity, echoing the same nationalist appeals that underpinned the Leave campaign in 2016.

Several interviewees expressed concern that the Brexit vote had "opened the door" to more extreme rhetoric and legitimised exclusionary views. Reform's growing influence suggests that the political and cultural realignments ignited by Brexit are not temporary but form part of a deeper reconfiguration of British identity politics, one that continues to alienate many young people who favour more inclusive, pro-European values. In this context, divides are ongoing in Britain's contested national identity.

A problem for European Integration

Growing anti-European sentiments across EU show a rejection of developing a common European Identity (Albinger, 2020). Nationalist movements across Europe are rooted in identity crisis, and the pushback to globalisation seen in Britain is echoed across the world. The perceived cultural loss that led Brits to vote remain has not been answered by leaving the EU, demonstrated further by the growing incorporation of young people in left behind social groups and the rise of new populism. Future European integration may rest largely on the ability for a shared European Identity to be constructed and meaningfully maintained at the domestic level.

Brexit, as a phenomenon, presents a paradox. Disintegration from Europe may actually provide a greater opportunity for European solidarity (Donnelly, 2022; Pimor, 2021; Sully, 2016). The response of young people to Brexit may be a deterrence from

other EU Member States following in the UK's footsteps, contradictory to post-functionalist theories of European disintegration. Identity, here, is shown not as a fixed category but as something formed and re-formed in relation to political events.

Post-Brexit, many young people are increasingly engaging with European 'values' which they feel was stripped away from them, without having had a say and through perceived political manipulation. European integration thus becomes more than factual, but with references to cultures views of identity and values, has now become emotional. For Europeans to negative see this could actually encourage them to embrace European identity.

It is clear that youth identities have been affected by Brexit, in different ways. On the international geo-political scale, tensions are ongoing between the "internationalist" post-Brexit Britain as an independent, global player as foreseen by Theresa May (Oliver, 2017), and the possible necessity to reintegrate with the EU. The geopolitical international climate has changed drastically since 2016. Recent political shifts may signal a reconnection with Europe, especially as the United States can arguably no longer be relied on as a guarantor of European security (Maddock, 2025). The war in Ukraine has also brought the UK closer to the EU as current Labour government is working on a comprehensive UK-EU defence partnership (EEAS, 2025). It is likely that the current Government understands the risks of ignoring youth disillusionment, as they take steps to reintroduce mobility with the EU for young people (Armstrong, 2025; Lammy, 2024).

Summary

In summary, a pro-European sentiment remains a defining feature of youth political identity, even in a post-Brexit context. Support for Labour, and even more so for the Green Party, reflects not just economic or domestic policy preferences, but also deeper affective commitments to openness, internationalism, and European values. However, this is not uniform. It is evident therefore that since Brexit, gender gaps have therefore become more pronounced, in regards to British identity and immigration, leading to a

potential gendered generational polarisation. Yet overall, support for the Greens or Reform UK as alternatives among young people signals diverging responses to the political vacuum created by Brexit. However, despite the increase of young Reform voters, support rarely goes beyond 20 per cent (Islam, 2025), showing they are a long way from being the most popular option for young Brits.

Conclusion

This thesis set answered the question: *"How did the generational divide in the Brexit referendum reflect identity as a key driver of the vote, and how has Brexit subsequently shaped youth identity in the UK?"*

Rather than offering a complete explanation of the referendum outcome, the study concentrated on two tasks; firstly, to demonstrate the centrality of identity in the Leave vs Remain generational cleavage, and secondly, to trace the subsequent ramifications of that divide for the political and cultural identities of young Britons.

This thesis proves that Brexit revealed a crisis of competing identities between generations. Generational socialisation explains the depth of the age divide, as older voters drew on nostalgia for an imagined nation-state whereas younger voters, socialised in a cosmopolitan EU framework, interpreted Brexit as a loss of citizenship and opportunity. In its aftermath, the referendum has thus restructured youth identity, deepening identification with European norms and rejecting traditional Britishness. Identities are constructed based on similarities and contrasts between groups (Barsallo et al., 2024), and this thesis reveals that an overarching distinction between older 'Leavers' and younger 'Remainers' identities remains politically salient.

Firstly, in Part I of this thesis, key identity theory was analysed in relation to Brexit, alongside empirical evidence for the generational gap in attitudes. A pluralism of research on identity was investigated, focusing on constructivism to understand the role of identity as key in motivating political behaviour. Immigration as the primary concern of Leave voters reveals an identity conflict, and the rejection of a new, multicultural Britain. Furthermore, while economic concerns were present, they do not explain the sharp and consistent age-based divide.

Analysis of media use and political rhetoric from the Brexit campaigning deepened the link between identity of older generations and voting to leave the EU. We understand this further through theory encompassing differing socialisation of each generation in relation to political events, as identity is shaped in relation to political

rupture and social context. This proved the hypothesis that Brexit was “first and foremost about identity” (Palmer, 2021, p5).

As stated, Brexit thus represents both a symptom and a cause of identity crisis in the UK, ultimately supporting claims that those who felt the strongest sense of national identity were older generations who understood British identity as incompatible with European identity (Albinger, 2020), and showed greater hostility to immigration. In contrast, younger generations are more able to embrace hybrid identities, welcoming their European identity alongside other national identities.

In addition, Part II of this thesis investigated the effects of Brexit on youth identity formation. The conclusion can be drawn that Brexit has altered identity formation and heightened political consciousness of young Britons. Empirical polling data demonstrates that young people overwhelmingly show a positive attitude towards European integration and recognise the negative effects of Brexit.

For many, identification with Europe or reduced British/English national pride symbolises a rejection of Brexit and what it represents. Data and interviews both demonstrate that young people are more likely to support some form of reintegration with the EU, especially those with international experience and higher levels of education. Some identify as more European after Brexit, demonstrating affiliation for European identities as both normative and compensatory; an embracement of European norms of shared cultures and multiculturalism, as well as a perceived loss.

For many young people, divisive rhetoric on Brexit due politicised British identity, based on the rejection of immigration in favour of a return to ‘traditional British values’,which provides the basis for increased negative associations with *Britishness.* The Leave campaign to reclaim tradition and British values has, in this sense, backfired. Young people interviewed expressed shame, anger or resentment, with few believing that Brexit overall had been positive for Britain.

Heightened political consciousness amongst younger people is double-edged; electoral turnout and political participation have risen, yet so too have disillusionment and experimentation with alternative or anti-establishment political parties. This thesis

explored the link between Brexit and high youth political participation, and simultaneously with disillusionment with the political system, with some searching for political alternatives.

Furthermore, the second part of this thesis focused on an age group which exists in a liminal political space, as many were too young to vote in the referendum but they have been disproportionately affected by the consequences of EU withdrawal, further linking to this disillusionment.

However, all generations in the UK are shaped by different experiences due to differing levels of education, socio-economic status, race and gender, and neither older or younger categories cannot be seen as a homogenous block (John Smith Center, 2025). A small but increasing subgroup of the young generation analysed are shaping a new geopolitical landscape, increasing support to anti-establishment party Reform UK in the search of alternatives to classic politics, or the further left-leaning Green party. Although the findings show that there exists a strong majority of pro-EU in younger generations which would lead to a hypothesis of potential greater UK-EU cooperation, or potential re-integration, the picture is not entirely progressive.

Identity crises echo around the world; the rise of populist leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States or the popularity of the AfD in Germany. Brits are not alone in calling into question who they are after a period globalisation and immigration. The movement of predominantly young men towards alternative right wing politics, shows a possible movement beyond the ‘generational war’, showing values of the Reform UK party of returning to a Great, sovereign Britain are appealing to demographics beyond the older generations.

This thesis shows the UK is arguably still as divided as it was during the referendum. On paper, Brexit tells a story of the winners and the left behind. The generational gulf, however, goes deeper into these value based fractures. Widening intra-generational cleavages and mounting socio-economic insecurity continue to unsettle collective identities. Typical left-wing right-wing party destinations are becoming less important, although the UK is still divided, as in-group out-group

‘othering’ persists mainly on issues of culture. Recent success of Reform UK shows that the narratives driving the Leave campaign are far from gone. Identity continues to be a powerful and polarising political tool shaping the UK political landscape, as Brexit has not satiated political appetite of a return to traditional national identities, British values, and reclamation of control over immigration.

Future research could explore social divides in more depth, focusing on how gender, socio-economic status and education level also played a role in the Brexit vote and in post-Brexit national youth identity construction. Further studies could also include questions on how masculinity intersects with nationalism among younger voters, and the role economic insecurity in shaping political identity post-Brexit. In addition, media coverage on Brexit was expansive, and the role of social media in generational polarisation could be analysed further in future studies.

Furthermore, this study is mainly relevant to Gen Z. Future generations growing up without European citizenship will undoubtedly have very different views on their European and British identities having grown up and been socialised in a post-Brexit Britain. Limited conclusions can be made on identity formation for future generations, as they may well be socialised without a European identity. This thesis investigated the link between identity and mobility through contact theory, therefore if mobility is not reinstated for young people they may disassociate further from European identities, reinforcing British excpetionalisim.

Looking ahead, it could be hypothesised that as today’s highly educated, globally connected generation ascends to political prominence, the nationalist impulse that underpinned Brexit will lose its traction in British public life. Yet the picture is not linear. A far-sighted youth-mobility agreement with the EU could therefore symbolise a renewed commitment to openness, reciprocity and shared opportunity, and may help young Britons reconcile national belonging with a cosmopolitan outlook, softening polarisation and fostering a more inclusive vision of British identity for the coming decades.

Bibliography

1. Albinger, L.K. (2020) *Constructivism's Relevance to Understanding Brexit*. E-International Relations. Available at: https://www.e-ir.info/2020/06/08/constructivisms-relevance-to-understanding-brexit/ (Accessed 4 June 2025).

2. Anderson, B. (1983) Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London: Verso.

3. Armstrong, K. (2025) 'Youth mobility scheme could be part of EU deal, PM signals', BBC News. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c706e6nxwr4o (Accessed 7 June 2025)

4. Ashcroft, M. (2016) 'How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday… and why', *Lord Ashcroft Polls*, 24 June. Available at: https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/ (Accessed 9 June 2025).

5. Aughey, A. (2007) *The Politics of Englishness,* Manchester: Manchester University Press. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155jbwp (Accessed 9 June 2025).

6. Barsallo, G. et al. (2024) 'Generational Identity, Values, and Sense of Belonging', Social Sciences (2076-0760), 13(12), p. 641. doi:10.3390/socsci13120641

7. BBC News (2021) 'EU referendum: The result in maps and charts', *BBC News*, 8 June. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36616028 (Accessed: 8 June 2025).

8. BBC News (2025) 'Local election results 2025 in England', *BBC News.* Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/election/2025/england/results (Accessed: 22 May 2025).

9. Beck U. and Grande, E. (2007) *Cosmopolitan Europe.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

10. Booth, R. (2023) 'Younger Britons are more pro-EU but 'fixing' Brexit not their priority' *The Guardian,* 30 November. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/

politics/2023/nov/30/younger-britons-are-more-pro-eu-but-fixing-brexit-not-their-priority (Accessed 8 June 2025).

11. Brubaker, R. (1996) *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

12. Brubaker, R. (2000) 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, 29(1), pp. 1–47.

13. Burnett, J. (2017)'Racial violence and the Brexit state', *Race and Class*, 58(4), pp. 85–97. Available at: https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2016/nov/racial-violence-and-the-brexit-state-irr.pdf (Accessed: 9 June 2025).

14. Calhoun, C. (2017) 'The Rhetoric of Nationalism'. in *Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging After Banal Nationalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 17-30. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57098-7_2

15. Carl, N., Dennison, J., & Evans, G. (2018) 'European but not European enough: An explanation for Brexit'. *European Union Politics*, 20(2), pp. 282-304. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116518802361

16. Checkel, J.T. and Katzenstein,P.J. (2009). *European identity*. Cambridge University Press.

17. Clarke, H.D., Goodwin, M. and Whiteley, P. (2017) Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

18. Curtice, J and Scholes, A. (2024) *British Social Attitudes 41: National Identity.* London: National Centre for Social Research. Available at: https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/british-social-attitudes-41-national-identity (Accessed 4 June 2025).

19. Curtice, J. (2020) *Has Brexit gone off the boil? Or are the embers of Brexit still glowing?*, NatCen Social Research/What UK Thinks: EU, 10 November. Available at: https://www.whatukthinks.org/eu/analysis/has-brexit-gone-off-the-boil-or-are-the-embers-of-brexit-still-glowing/ (Accessed 5 June 2025).

20. Curtice, J. (2024a) 'BSA 41: One-dimensional or two-dimensional?; The changing dividing lines of Britain's electoral politics'. *National Centre of Social*

Research, 12 June. Available at: https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/bsa-41-one-dimensional-or-two-dimensional (Accessed 8 June 2025)

21. Curtice, J. (2024b) 'What do Labour voters want Starmer to do about Brexit?' *UK in a Changing Europe,* 2 July. Available at: https://ukandeu.ac.uk/what-do-labour-voters-want-a-labour-government-to-do-about-brexit/ (Accessed 20 May 2025).

22. Curtice, J. (2025) Five Years On: Why Have Public Attitudes to Brexit Changed? National Centre for Social Research. Available at: https://www.whatukthinks.org/eu/2025/01/31/five-years-on-why-have-public-attitudes-to-brexit-changed/ (Accessed 29 April 2025)

23. De Freytas-Tamura, K. (2016) 'Youth Wave Sees 'Brexit' as a Threat to Dreams', *New York Times*, 16 May, Available: https://0-link-gale-com.opac.bilgi.edu.tr/apps/doc/A455928334/CSIC?u=bilgiandsid=bookmark-CSICandxid=35c817d3 (Accessed 04 Jun 2025).

24. Difford, D. (2025a) 'How do Gen Z think their own lives compare to their parents'? *YouGov,* 21 February. Available at: https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/51660-how-do-gen-z-britons-think-their-own-lives-compare-to-their-parents (11 June 2025).

25. Difford, D. (2025b) 'How to Britons feel about Brexit five years on?' *YouGov*. 29 January. Available at: https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/51484-how-do-britons-feel-about-brexit-five-years-on (Accessed: 22 May 2025)

26. Donnelly, B. (2022) 'United Kingdom: Brexit Meets European Solidarity'. In: Kaeding, M., Pollak, J., Schmidt, P. (eds), *European Solidarity in Action and the Future of Europe*. The Future of Europe. Springer, Cham.

27. Emerson, L. (2021) 'The Brexit Generation: five years on', *Intergenerational Foundation*. Available at: https://www.if.org.uk/2021/06/24/the-brexit-generation-five-years-on/ (Accessed: 4 June 2025).

28. European External Action Service (EEAS), 2024. *Security and Defence: EU and UK conclude security and defence partnership*. [online] Available at: https://

www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/security-and-defence-eu-and-uk-conclude-security-and-defence-partnership_en (Accessed 10 June 2025).

29. Evans, J. and Joshi, O. (2019) 'British attitudes on national identity and religious identities not unique in EU', *Pew Research Center*, 19 February. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/02/19/british-attitudes-on-national-identity-and-religious-minorities-not-unique-in-eu/ (Accessed 7 June 2025).

30. Ferdjani, Y. (2022) 'Brexit and the emergence of new English identity'. *Observatorie de la société britannique,* pp 47-65, https://doi.org/10.4000/osb.5588

31. Finlay, R., Nayak, A., Benwell, M. C., Pande, R., and Richardson, M. (2020). Race, place and young people in the age of Brexit. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 37(1), pp17-23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263774X18811923d

32. Ford, R., and Goodwin, M. (2016) 'Britain After Brexit: A Nation Divided', *Journal of Democracy,* 28(1), pp. 17-30.

33. Fox, S. and Pearce, S. (2017) 'The generational decay of Euroscepticism in the UK and the EU referendum', *Journal of Election*s, 28(1), pp. 19–37. doi: 10.1080/17457289.2017.1371180.

34. Galpin, C. (2023) 'Anglo-British exceptionalism and the European "Other": white masculinities in discourses of British national identity', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 26(2), pp. 375–401. doi: 10.1080/14616742.2023.2265949.

35. Gellner, E.(1983). *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

36. George, S. (1998) *An awkward partner: Britain in the European Community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

37. Gibbins, J. (2020) 'Theorizing Brexit: UK/EU Relations and International Relations Theory', paper presented at *The International Virtual Conference on Social Sciences,* May 2020. doi: 10.33422/ivcss.2020.05.155.

38. Glencross, A. (2014). ‘British Euroscepticism as British Exceptionalism: The Forty-Year “Neverendum” on the Relationship with Europe’. *Studia Diplomatica*, 67(4), pp. 7–20. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26541986

39. Hall, S. (1990) ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in Gilroy, P. and Gilmore, R. W. *Selected Writings on Race and Differenc*e. Duke University Press, 2021, pp. 257–271. JSTOR, Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1hhj1b9.17.

40. Hänska, M. and Bauchowitz, S., (2017) ‘Tweeting for Brexit: how social media influenced the referendum’, in Mair, J., Clark, T., Fowler, N., Snoddy, R. and Tait, R. (eds.) *Brexit, Trump and the Media*. Bury St Edmunds: Abramis Academic Publishing, pp. 31–35. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/84614/ (Accessed 9 June 2025).

41. Healy, R. ‘UK music industry presses government to solve post-Brexit limits on touring’. *The Guardian,* 8 September. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/business/article/2024/sep/08/uk-music-industry-presses-government-to-solve-post-brexit-limits-on-touring (Accessed 1 June 2025).

42. Heath, O., Prosser, C., Southall, H., and Aucott, P. (2024). The 2024 General Election and the Rise of Reform UK. The Political Quarterly, 96(1), pp91-101. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13484

43. Hinsliff, G. (2025) ‘Nigel Farage feels real’: why young British men are drawn to Reform, *The Guardian,* 8 March. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/mar/08/nigel-farage-feels-real-why-young-british-men-are-drawn-to-reform

44. Hobsbawm, E. (1990) *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521439612.

45. Hodson D. and U. Puetter., (2019). The European Union in disequilibrium: new intergovernmentalism, post functionalism and integration theory in the post-Maastricht period. *Journal of European Public Policy* 26(8) pp.1154-1171. doi: 10.1080/13501763.2019.1569712

46. Hooghe, L. and Marks, G. (2009) ‘A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From PermissiveConsensus to Constraining Dissensus’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), pp. 1–23. doi:10.1017/S0007123408000409.

47. Inglehart, R. And Wezel, C. (2005) *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: the human development sequence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

48. Islam, S. (2025). Support for Reform UK grows among young voters https://www.swlondoner.co.uk/news/16052025-support-for-reform-uk-grows-among-young-voters

49. Jack Petchey Foundation. (2019) ‘Over 6,000 young people respond to survey on Brexit in just 10 days… here is what THEY think”, *Jack Petchey Foundation.* Available at: https://www.jackpetcheyfoundation.org.uk/news/over-6000-young-people-respond-to-survey-on-brexit-in-just-10-dayshere-is-what-they-think/ (Accessed 5 June 2025).

50. Jackson, D., Thorsen, E. and Wring. (2016) *EU Referendum Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign*. The Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community. Available at: https://0-research-ebsco-com.opac.bilgi.edu.tr/linkprocessor/plink?id=288666ce-6307-3969-8f09-1335a841391c (Accessed 1 June 2025).

51. Kavanagh, D. (2018) Brexit, the Conservatives and the General Election 2017. Revue Française De Civilisation Britannique, 23(2). doi: 10.4000/rfcb.2085

52. Keating, M. (2004) ‘European Integration and the Nationalities Question’, *Politics and Society*, 32(3), pp. 367-388. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329204267295

53. Keating, M. (2021) ‘Taking back control? Brexit and the territorial constitution of the United Kingdom’, *Journal of European Public Policy,* 29(4), pp. 491–509. doi: 10.1080/13501763.2021.1876156.

54. Kelly, J. (2016) 'Brexit: How much of a generation gap is there?', *BBC News,* 24 June, Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36619342 (Accessed 8 June 2025).

55. Kingman, D. (2017) Generation Remain: *Understanding the Millennial Vote*. London: Intergenerational Foundation. Available at: https://www.if.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Generation-Remain_final_October_2017.compressed.pdf (Accessed: 4 June 2025).

56. Lammy, D. (2024) *It's time to reset Britain's relations with Europe*. London: UK Government. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/its-time-to-reset-britains-relations-with-europe-article-by-david-lammy (Accessed: 7 June 2025).

57. Lee, J., Beech, S., McDowell, S., Holton, M. (2024) 'Citizens apart? Representing post−Brexit youth politics in the UK media', *Geographical Journal*, 190(3), pp. 1–11. doi:10.1111/geoj.12571.

58. Maddock, T. (2025) 'From Reset to Renewal: Prospects for UK−EU Relations in 2025', *British Foreign Policy Group*, 3 January. Available at: https://bfpg.co.uk/2025/01/from-reset-to-renewal-prospects-for-uk-eu-relations-in-2025/ (Accessed 9 June 2025).

59. Mannheim, K., (1952) *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

60. Mcdonnell, A (2024). 'How Britain voted in the general election'. *YouGov,* 8 July. Available at: https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/49978-how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-general-election (Accessed: 23 May 2025).

61. McNeil, A., and Haberstroh, C. (2023) Intergenerational social mobility and the Brexit vote: How social origins and destinations divide Britain. *European Journal of Political Research*, 62(2), pp. 612-632. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12526

62. Meek, J. (2018) 'Brexit and myths of Englishness', *London Review of Books*, 40(19), 11 October, n.p. Available at: https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n19/james-meek/brexit-and-myths-of-englishness (Accessed 11 June 2025).

63. Migration Observatory (2025) 'UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern'. Available at: https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/

64. Mintchev, N. (2020) The cultural politics of racism in the Brexit conjuncture. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(1), pp123-140. doi: 10.1177/1367877920935135

65. Nairn, T, (2003) *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism*. Melbourne: Common Ground Publishing. Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=g3GOn2em9pgC (Accessed 1 May 2025).

66. National Centre for Social Research. (2024) *Identity issues now key dividing line in Britain's politics,* Press Release, 12 June, Available at: https://natcen.ac.uk/news/identity-issues-now-key-dividing-line-britains-politics (Accessed 6 April 2025).

67. National Centre for Social Research (2025): Should the United Kingdom join the European Union or stay out of the European Union? *What UK Thinks.* Available at: https://www.whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/should-the-united-kingdom-join-the-european-union-or-stay-out-of-the-european-union/ (Accessed 8 May 2025).

68. Oborune, K. (2013) 'Becoming more European after Erasmus? The impact of the Erasmus programme on political and cultural identity', *Epiphany,* Journal of transdisciplinary studies, 6(1), pp.182-202.

69. Oliver, T. J. (2017) 'A new British identity is key to Brexit's success. So who do we want to be?' *The Guardian,* 16 August. Available at*:* https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/16/british-identity-key-brexit-crisis-negotiations (Accessed 22 May 2025).

70. Onuf, N.G. (2012) 'Constructivism', in *World of our making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations.* London: Routledge. pp. 35-65.

71. O'Toole, F. (2016) 'Brexit is being driven by English nationalism. And it will end in self-rule' *The Guardian,* 19 June. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/18/england-eu-referendum-brexit (Accessed 9 June 2025).

72. O'Toole, F. (2019) 'It is not just the economy, stupid – Brexit is about belonging', *The Irish Times*, 22 January. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-it-is-not-just-the-economy-stupid-brexit-is-about-belonging-1.3765447 (Accessed 3 June 2025).

73. Palmer, C. (2021) 'The Order of Things: Brexit and the Challenge of Identity', in Andrews, H. *Tourism and Brexit: Borders and Identity.* Bristol, UK: Channel View Publications. Available at: https://0-research-ebsco-com.opac.bilgi.edu.tr/linkprocessor/plink?id=35784bf1-dd1e-3245-89df-48d6193169a4 (Accessed 7 June 2025).

74. Pimor, A. (2021) '"Travel broadens the mind and enriches the soul": Exploring the Significance of Tourism and Brexit on the Spiritual Dimension of European Integration' in Andrews, H, *Tourism and Brexit: Travel, Borders and Identity.* Bristol, UK: Channel View Publications. Available at: https://0-research-ebsco-com.opac.bilgi.edu.tr/linkprocessor/plink?id=35784bf1-dd1e-3245-89df-48d6193169a4 (Accessed 7 June 2025).

75. Risse, T. (2010) *A Community of Europeans?: Transnational Identities and Public Spheres.* Cornell University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt7v8r0

76. Robertson, C. (2021) 'Brexit, Populism, and Emotive Politics', in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Interest Groups, Lobbying and Public Affairs*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13895-0_20-2 (Accessed 9 June 2025).

77. Scottish Government (2025). *Youth mobility agreement with the EU: position paper.* Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/youth-mobility-agreement-with-the-eu-position-paper/ (Accessed: 4 June 2025).

78. Sczepanski, R. (2023) ‘Who are the Cosmopolitans? How Perceived Social Sorting and Social Identities Relate to European and National Identities’. *Comparative Political Studies*, 57(7), pp. 1210-1239. https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140231194054

79. Shaw, M. (2019) ‘Vote Leave relied on racism. Brexit: The Uncivil War disguised that ugly truth’, *The Guardian,* 8 January. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/08/vote-leave-racism-brexit-uncivil-war-channel-4 (Accessed 8 June 2025)

80. Singh, R. (2016) ‘Brexit referendum: Voting analysis’, *The Parliament Magazine*, 4 July. Available at: https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/brexit-referendum-voting-analysis (Accessed 8 June 2025).

81. Sloam, J. & Henn, M. (2019) *Youthquake 2017: The Rise of Young Cosmopolitans in Britain*. Springer International Publishing. Available at: https://0-research-ebsco-com.opac.bilgi.edu.tr/linkprocessor/plink?id=5c909bb0-038f-3293-a0df-9cc79614c0b6 (Accessed 5 June 2025).

82. Smellie, S. (2024) ‘Attitudes and narratives on immigration: is Scotland really different?’ *The Royal Society of Edinburgh,* 28 March. Available at: https://rse.org.uk/resource/attitudes-and-narratives-on-immigration-is-scotland-really-different/ (Accessed 9 June 2025).

83. Smith, A.D. (1986) *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

84. Smith, A.D. (1991) *National Identity*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.

85. Sully, M. (2016) ‘Brexit: The lost generation’, *Euractiv,* 18 August, Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/opinion/brexit-the-lost-generation/ (Accessed 4 June 2025).

86. Tajfel, H. and Turner, J.C. (1979) ‘An integrative theory of intergroup conflict’, in: W.G. Austin and S. Worchel, eds. *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, pp. 33–47.

87. Tilley, J. and Hobolt, S.B. (2023) ‘Brexit as an Identity: Political Identities and Policy Norms’, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 56(4), pp. 546–552. doi:10.1017/S1049096523000367.

88. Tournier−Sol, K. (2023) ‘Playing the Identity Card: from Brexit to Culture Wars’, *Observatoire de la société britannique*, 30, pp. 55–72. doi: 10.4000/osb.6040.

89. Wendt, A. (1992) 'Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics’. *International Organization*, 46(2), pp.391–425. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764 (Accessed 5 June 2025).

90. White, J. (2023) ‘Deepening Identity Divides in Post-Brexit Britain: The Home Office, Rhetoric and Authoritarianism’. *Observatoire de la société britannique*, 30, pp. 93-117. doi: https://doi.org/10.4000/osb.6060

91. Wilson, H. (2024) ‘How Brexit reshaped party politics’ *National Centre for Social Research,* 19 July, Available at: https://natcen.ac.uk/how-brexit-reshaped-party-politics (Accessed 5 June 2025).

92. Yeginsu, C. (2017) ‘What Turned the British Election? Maybe the Youth Vote’, *The New York Times*, 9 June. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/world/europe/britain-elections-youth-vote.html (Accessed 4 June 2025).

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from? (Which region of the UK or which country? Do you hold a second nationality/non-UK passport?)
3. What is your level of education and your current status? (Are you a student, professional, or unemployed/seeking work?)
4. Have you ever lived in another country (for an exchange program, etc.)?
5. Did you vote in the Brexit referendum? If so, how did you vote?
6. How has Brexit affected you?
7. If you could vote again now, how would you vote?
8. Do you think Brexit was a good or bad thing?
9. How would you define British identity? (When you think of being British, what comes to mind?)
10. To what extent do you identify yourself as British?
11. How would you define a European identity?
12. To what extent do you identify yourself as European?
13. Has your perception of your own identification with being British changed since the UK left the EU?
14. Has your perception of your identification with being European changed? (Do you feel more or less European now?)
15. There was a large difference in how older and younger generations voted. Why would you think this is?
16. How would you like our future relationship with the European Union to look like?

17. Is there anything else that you would like to mention, add, or bring to the discussion?