

European Identities

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Introduction

What is #FBPE?

The ‘FBPE’ hashtag was created following the UK’s vote to leave the EU and the election of President Trump in 2016. The creator, a Dutch man named Hendrik Klaassens, became concerned about the rise of far-right parties and populist movements, especially in EU countries which had upcoming elections in 2017. This led to the formation of “*two pan-European hashtags that we could use to build a network of all those across Europe who support the EU and fight political extremism: #FollowBackProEU and the acronym #FBPE*” (Klaassens, 2020). The acronym #FBPE is by far the most widely used of these two hashtags, so this will be the focus of the paper. The use of #FBPE expanded rapidly on Twitter and is particularly popular in the UK among anti-Brexit movements as a way for ‘remain’ voters to identify each other online (Belam, 2018).

How is #FBPE used?

Twitter users usually put ‘#FBPE’ in their username or bio, to clearly identify themselves as pro-EU and one who will ‘follow back’ other users who also display the hashtag. This is important as it is a permanent fixture to many people’s accounts, rather than just a hashtag used when sending tweets. #FBPE is also used in regular tweets, however, this is often in conjunction with follow-back events such as ‘#FollowBackFriday’, in which #FBPE users actively promote, and seek, pro-EU accounts in order to expand their network. So, this phenomenon appears to be a very much grassroots, bottom-up, campaign driven by ordinary people. However, prominent actors such as MEP Guy Verhofstadt have previously used the hashtag to promote the movement (Verhofstadt, 2017). There are currently users from 42 different countries using the hashtag (Klaassens, 2020).

Motivation

There has been much debate into the success of the EU's attempts at the construction of a transnational public sphere and ultimately, a European identity (Eder, 2006; Risse, 2010; Cram, 2011). Prior to the Brexit vote in 2016 the advantages of EU membership seemed rather invisible to many average citizens. It seemed quite taken for granted that the EU simply *existed* as a slightly abstract and far away notion, without much direct intrusion in most people's lives – apart from an election every five years, which many people know surprisingly little about (Liebert, 2007, p 260). However, the subsequent four and a half years of intense negotiations threw the benefits of membership into the spotlight, especially for the 48% of the British electorate who voted to remain in the EU. This seems to have acted as a catalyst for the emergence of a long awaited European public sphere, particularly on Twitter where users openly proclaim themselves as pro-EU and discuss EU related issues. As #FBPE is such a new phenomenon, no research has yet been conducted on it, or its effect on the presence of a European identity.

Literature Review

The nature of what identity is has long since been debated. Given the subject of this study, a newly formed online community, it seems appropriate to engage with Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities. According to Anderson (1991) any community larger than a primordial village "*is **imagined** because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion*" (p 6). Anderson credits the rise of imagined communities to print capitalism, which allowed many people to consume the same national media in the same language and therefore share collective stories of how the community came to be and what its current concerns are. However, the evolution of new technologies such as the internet

and social media, has led to an exponential increase in available media. A lot of media is no longer physically printed, but published digitally, making disseminating it significantly cheaper than traditional print media. Anyone with access to the internet may produce and distribute media, leading to a divergence from the 'official' national narrative. This fragmentation, however, has created a space for new imagined communities to emerge, and select which narratives they identify with – which stories define them.

Bennett (2011) suggests that the rise of “*personalized politics*” plays an important role in this; an individual’s emotions, lifestyle choices and values can all be appealed to, and this will affect their political orientation. The pervasive nature of social media allows people to share their stories and concerns, “*enable[ing] individuals to become important catalysts of collective action processes as they activate their own social networks*” (p 22). Therefore, an individual may spark a whole new online (imagined) community, as Klaassens has done with the #FBPE movement. But how do these communities distinguish themselves from one another? How does one know which media to consume, or ideals to subscribe to, to be part of a certain community? And how does one let others know that they are part of the same community?

Risse (2010) adopts a social constructivist perspective towards this problem, claiming that identity is not an objectively real, pre-existing thing to be discovered but rather that “*identities emerge in the very process by which individuals and social groups make sense of who they are and what they want*” (p 20). According to Risse, these new online (imagined) communities effectively construct their own identities through their interactions and narratives. Although the community is imagined, this does not make it any less real in people’s minds. In fact, Risse (2010) claims people must consider a community ‘real’ before they form an emotional attachment or loyalty to it, and the stronger the loyalty, the more real-life behavioural consequences we should expect (p 30). Therefore, this study will be situated within a social

constructivist perspective and will explore the identity construction of imagined communities through online platforms.

Research Question

Social media transcends locational restrictions and allows users to interact in real time; it creates a platform for discussion, distribution of international news, and information sharing from across Europe, and indeed, the world. The findings of this study will contribute to the field of research into identity construction and performance through social interactions online, specifically those on Twitter. This study was undertaken to explore the emergence, and promotion of #FBPE as a symbol for European identity on this social media platform. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the research question: how has the hashtag 'FBPE' (FollowBackProEU) promoted the presence of a European identity on Twitter? However, given the previous mention of the high number of British, specifically anti-Brexit, users of #FBPE, this study will also try to answer the following sub-questions: does being anti-Brexit necessarily equate to identifying as European? And has Brexit inadvertently created the beginning of a shift towards identifying as European?

Methodology: Data Collection

As this study focuses on Twitter, this seemed the most appropriate platform on which to gather data. As previously mentioned, although users do use #FBPE in regular tweets, this is not the main use of the hashtag. Therefore, harvesting tweets would not be beneficial to answering the research question, as this would not necessarily reveal user's feelings towards their own identity. Instead, a short survey consisting of both qualitative and quantitative elements was created for distribution on Twitter. The survey consisted of 10 questions concerning: nationality, identity, use of #FBPE, and Brexit. The first two questions were to determine the nationality and current country of residence of the participant. This was to establish whether

there was a significantly higher concentration of users in the UK/British users, due to Brexit. However, the results may be biased towards this, given the survey is conducted in English and is therefore more likely to attract English speaking participants.

The next question asked participants to rank from 1 to 4 (with 1 being most, and 4 being least) how important the following factors were to their personal identity: Nationality (at birth), 'Europeanness', Current Country of residence, and City/Region. This was to quantify how important the participants identification with Europe was in comparison to the other factors, and to engage with Risse's (2010) discussion of "*multiple identities*" (pp. 23-25). Following this, participants were asked how they had heard about #FBPE to determine if it was a strictly Twitter-based phenomenon. Users were then asked to detail why they used #FBPE and were provided with a comment box so they could provide a descriptive response. Users were also asked which other hashtags they used, alongside #FBPE. This was to indicate any popular and recurring themes that people associate with the movement, which may be useful for further research into political movements on Twitter.

There were also four different questions surrounding Brexit. These questions were to ascertain the participants' feelings towards Brexit, whether they were British or not. This was also to explore the effects of using #FBPE on people's opinions towards Brexit, as the #FBPE movement has been criticized as a radicalising echo chamber by "*providing a space for like-minded souls to furiously agree with each other and rage at the other side's idiocy*" (Cohen, 2019).

The survey was released onto Twitter via a tweet from my personal account, and specifically targeted the #FBPE movement by using the hashtag in the tweet. In total 297 responses were collected from the survey, with no duplicates, which indicates a high statistical significance for the findings.

Methodology: Analytical Approach

To analyse the data, I will be focusing on Risse's (2010) concepts of identity change, particularly the notion of "*rapid and far-reaching*" identity change (pp 32-33). This requires a profound upheaval or disruption of deeply held beliefs. I suggest that Brexit has been a "*critical juncture*" (Risse, 2010, p 32); a crisis which has challenged many people's beliefs about the stability of the EU. Although Risse (2010) claims it can be difficult to objectively identify a crisis or critical juncture as it tends to depend on an individual's perspective, I argue that this is the first instance of European disintegration that the EU has experienced. Therefore, this is a novel, and critical phenomenon for all EU citizens, whether they support EU integration or not. Therefore, I suggest that Brexit has been a catalyst for the formation of a specifically pro-EU/European identity group.

As the survey contained both qualitative and quantitative elements, the data will be analysed in different ways. The quantitative elements have been organised into graphs to provide overarching background statistics for the data set. This will help to formulate ideas about the generalisability of the data. The qualitative data has been coded into recurring themes using MAXQDA¹. When analysing the qualitative answers, I will be looking for the following aspects of identity: in-group vs. out-group, who is constructed as "us" and "them", and multiple identity construction. Risse (2010) claims that 'nesting' is the most commonly used model for explaining the connection between national and European identities, and quotes Herrmann and Brewer: "local identities are subsumed in national identities, and national identities subsumed in Europe-wide identities" (p 24). This can be thought of in a similar manner to the layers of an onion or Russian dolls. However, I suggest that Brexit has disrupted the ease of this model, especially for British citizens. Therefore, I will specifically analyse answers to the final

¹ Screenshots of code systems can be found in the Appendices under Appendix 1.

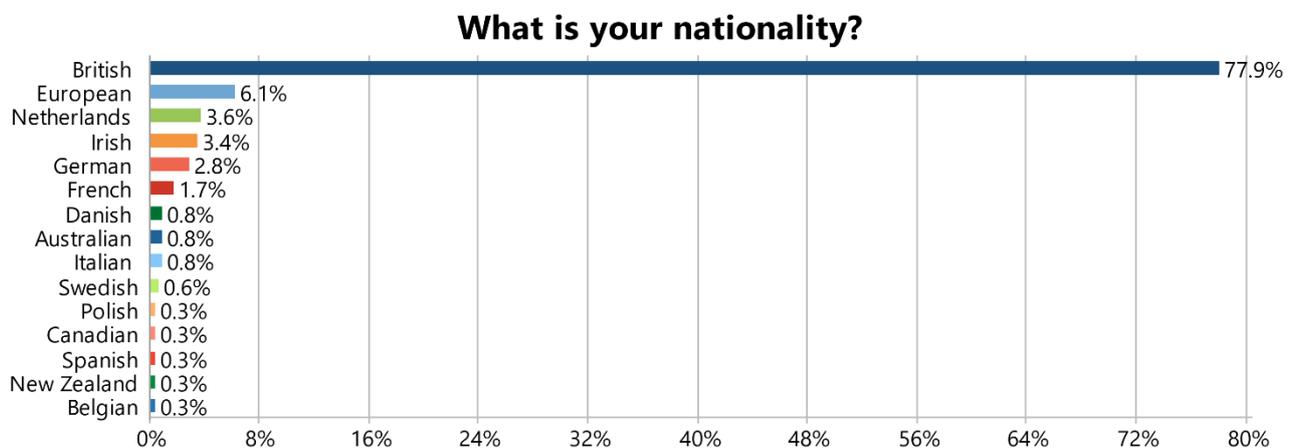
question on the effects of Brexit for mentions of multiple identities and identity conflict regarding national and European identity.

Analysis

Quantifiable Data

The following questions yielded quantifiable data:

What is your nationality?



77.9% of participants were British. However, it should be noted that under the ‘British’ category some participants also answered with their devolved nationality: English (18 participants), Scottish (11 participants) and Welsh (10 participants). Almost all other participants were of EU member state nationality.

6.1% of participants listed themselves as ‘European’. Out of 22 participants who identify their nationality as ‘European’, 10 answered with only ‘European’, and 12 answered with European alongside another nationality (e.g. ‘European/British’). This indicates a rejection of national identity for the 10 participants who listed only ‘European’ and may also indicate a hierarchical shift in the perceived importance of nationality for those who answered both European *and* another nationality. This indicates the presence of nested identities.

In which country do you currently reside?

75.2% of participants currently reside in the UK, compared to 77.9% who have British nationality. This indicates that at least 2.7% of British nationals who participated in this survey do not currently live in the UK. Overall, there were 20 different countries listed as the participants current country of residence², compared to 14 different nationalities (excluding ‘European’). This shows that the majority of participants are either British or live in the UK, so therefore are likely to be affected by the Brexit vote.

Please rank the following in terms of importance to your personal identity (with 1 being most important and 4 being least):

Factor	Average Rank	Individual Rank (Quantity and Percentage)							
		1		2		3		4	
<i>Nationality (at birth)</i>	2.73	64	21.55%	63	21.21%	59	19.87%	111	37.37%
<i>City/Region</i>	2.87	25	8.42%	72	24.24%	116	39.06%	84	28.28%
<i>Current country of residence</i>	2.84	19	6.40%	93	31.31%	101	34.01%	84	28.28%
<i>Europeanness</i>	1.56	189	63.64%	69	23.23%	21	7.07%	18	6.06%

63.64% of participants ranked ‘Europeanness’ as the most important to their personal identity, whereas ‘nationality (at birth)’ was ranked as the least important to 37.37% of participants. Considering the overall average rank, ‘Europeanness’ is the most important factor to most participants’ identity, with the other three options receiving a more balanced share of the

² A graph depicting this can be found in the Appendices under Appendix 2 .

rankings. This indicates that European identity has taken priority over national and local identity, challenging the idea of nested identities.

How did you first hear about #FBPE?

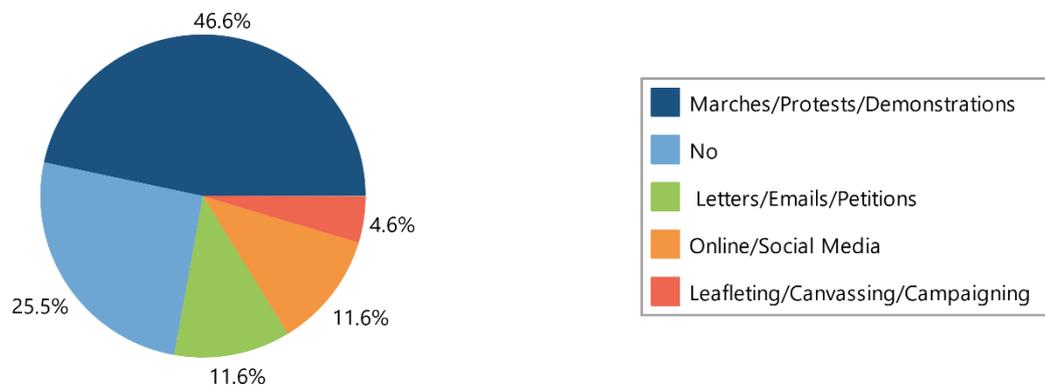
Participants were given multiple choices to answer this question:

<i>How did you first hear about #FBPE?</i>	Quantity	Percent
<i>On my Twitter feed</i>	272	91.58%
<i>Through a friend</i>	11	3.70%
<i>Through other media (e.g. a newspaper article)</i>	4	1.35%
<i>At an event</i>	1	0.34%
<i>Other</i>	9	3.03%

91.58% of participants know about #FBPE through Twitter. However, some users did hear about it through a friend or newspaper article, indicating a small reach outside of social media. This shows that #FBPE does not only exist as a Twitter-based movement.

Have you been involved in any anti-Brexit activities?

Have you been involved in any anti-Brexit activities?



74.5% of participants have been involved in anti-Brexit activities. Half of the participants had been involved with leafleting, canvassing, and campaigning, or have attended a march, protest, or demonstration. These are high-effort behaviours, indicating a strong emotional attachment or loyalty to the community. Within my sample it appears that many #FBPE users also participate in real-life anti-Brexit behaviours, showing this community can take strong collective actions.

Qualitative Data:

The following questions yielded descriptive, qualitative results:

Why do you use #FBPE?

These answers were initially openly coded for recurring themes. The three most mentioned reasons were that the participants were “European/Support[ed] Europe” (89 occurrences), that they would like to connect with “like-minded people” (78 occurrences), and that they were specifically “Pro-EU” (57 occurrences). The mention of “like-minded people” indicates the presence of an in-group who think like each other and is implicitly defined against those who are not “like-minded”, the out-group. One participant defined like-minded people as those who are “opposed to Brexit, and who support European unity and EU principles” (Participant 38067102). Using a complex coding query, I retrieved responses which had been coded with all three of the above codes³, in order to analyse similarities and differences in the responses. Out of four responses, two specifically mentioned the UK re-joining the EU, and using #FBPE as a tool to promote this political action. One response mentioned opposing Brexit, whilst the final response said:

³ These retrieved responses can be found in the Appendices under Appendix 3.

Because it expresses my passionate belief that we're better off in the EU and thinking of ourselves as Europeans as well as British. It's also a very useful tool for bringing together like-minded people on Twitter.

(Participant 38056649)

This participant shows evidence of a hierarchical nested identity. The participant initially identifies as 'British', and 'European' comes as an addition to this "as well". This indicates that although the participant passionately believes the UK would be better in the EU, they also identify strongly with their nationality, despite the change in EU membership.

This contrasts strongly with a response from another participant who wrote:

Because I was an EU citizen until that citizenship was taken away without consent. I no longer identify as English, instead I identify as Northumbrian. I have not left England, England left me! I shall always be European though!

(Participant 38055161)

This participant has experienced a big change in their personal identity and the loss of EU citizenship, caused by the Brexit vote, is given as the reason or "critical juncture" for this change in identity. The participant does still show signs of a nested identity, however a rejection of national identity has resulted in a more local identity taking priority in the hierarchy.

Would you say your opinion towards Brexit has changed since using #FBPE? If so, how?

The majority of participants, 201, answered 'no' to this question; however, 25 participants did qualify this by stating that they had always strongly opposed Brexit. However, 25 participants felt that their negative views towards Brexit had strengthened since using the hashtag, with 12 participants claiming this was due to gaining more information about Brexit from using #FBPE.

participants, Brexit has been an extremely negative experience, which could suggest it is a crisis or “critical juncture” for them.

Which other hashtags do you use, alongside #FBPE?

133 participants did not use any hashtags other than #FBPE. Of the remaining 164 participants the most popular hashtag (used by 32 participants) was ‘#3.5’ or ‘#3.5%’. This is a reference to Erica Chenoweth’s 3.5% rule, which states that this is the percentage of the population needed for non-violent civil disobedience to be successful (Chenoweth, 2013). Other popular hashtags were: ‘#GTTO’ - an abbreviation for ‘Get The Tories Out’ (20 occurrences), ‘#BLM’ -an abbreviation for ‘Black Lives Matter’ (17 occurrences) and ‘#RejoinEU’/‘#Rejoin’ – which had 16 and 11 occurrences, respectively. This indicates that within this sample, participants identify with other political movements alongside #FBPE. Arguably, #GTTO and #RejoinEU/#Rejoin are directly linked to being pro-EU, however #3.5% and #BLM do not have a direct connection to this. This supports Bennet’s theory of personalized politics, as individual political choices do not necessarily have to revolve around one specific campaign.

What influence has Brexit had on your identity?

These responses were openly coded into recurring themes. 41.7% of participants mentioned feeling less British or ashamed of identifying with the UK, because of Brexit. However, 39.4% of participants said Brexit had made them identify as more European. 17.8% of participants said they felt both less British *and* more European. One participant gave a very descriptive response:

It has had a tremendous influence on my identity. I am now ashamed to be British, despite serving for twenty years in the British armed forces. The only reason I would retain British citizenship is to retain residence rights here, and if I could get an EU citizenship I would. I feel more European than ever. I feel totally alienated by Brexit supporters. When meeting new people one of my first judgements is whether they support/supported Brexit, and it affects how I deal with them. I’ve also

become more progressive and left wing on a range of other social and political issues - it all feels wrapped up together. I gave a burning hatred of everything Brexit supporters stand for; for instance, despite my military background, I no longer donate to the Royal British Legion because it is so closely associated with Brexit supporters.

(Participant 38075993)

This participant once identified strongly enough with their British identity to join the armed forces and potentially “*die for the fatherland*” (Risse, p 30). However, they are now so ashamed of their British identity, they wish it possible to apply for another EU citizenship. For this participant, European identity has taken priority over identifying with the military, as this participant no longer wishes to donate money to a charity for the armed forces *because* of their association with Brexit supporters. Here there is also the clear formulation of an in-group, those who do not support Brexit, and out-group, those that do. This participant has a “burning hatred” of the out-groups values, which affects their behaviour towards people who are part of this group. For this participant, Brexit is clearly a “critical juncture” for their identity and has caused conflict between their ‘nested’ identities, leading to a change in behaviours.

Many British participants also stated a closer identification their local devolved nationality:

I am embarrassed to be British, I do not recognise myself as British, I recognise myself as Scottish and European. My ties to Europe are much more in line with the mainland than those of Brexit Britain.

(Participant 38059906)

It seems that some participants have simply cut “British” out of their nested identities, because of Brexit. This indicates that being British is shameful for members of the pro-EU in-group. The British nationality is constructed as negative due to its association with Brexit, whether the individual supported it or not, and there is a clear conflict between belonging to both the British and pro-EU in-group – one that is clearly irreconcilable for this participant.

Furthermore, 11 participants said they had either applied or were planning to apply for a different citizenship or passport because of Brexit. One participant said:

I was born in England to an English mother and a immigrant Irish father. I got my Irish passport after the referendum. I am a proud Irishman now. I guess I always was!

(Participant 38051138)

This participant cites Brexit, “the referendum”, as his reason for obtaining an Irish passport. This indicates it was a “critical juncture” for him, and caused him to identify as Irish, rather than British. Furthermore, 5 participants said that Brexit had caused them to leave the UK, one saying:

I feel a lot more ashamed to call myself British since the referendum, and I consider myself more as a European than as a Brit. I didn't feel as though I belonged in my homeland any more, which was part of my decision to move abroad.

(Participant 38054702)

This participant has clearly experienced a large change in their identity “since the referendum”, which has caused them to reject their national identity in favour of a European one. This identity shift has been so severe that this participant felt the need to leave their home country, an incredibly high-effort behaviour, indicating a strong identification with Europe.

Overall, Brexit has had a detrimental effect towards many participants British national identity. This has resulted in a shift towards identifying as more European and some people developed a stronger affinity towards their local identity.

Conclusion

#FBPE has mostly promoted the presence of a European identity on Twitter by allowing like-minded individuals to connect with each other and share pro-EU news and information. It has created an online community which, in this sample, consists of many British people who disagree with Brexit. Therefore, in this sample, those that identify themselves as the pro-EU in-group are likely to define themselves against the Brexit-supporting out-group. This indicates that being anti-Brexit does generally equate to identifying as pro-EU or European. Furthermore, the #FBPE community in this sample are also politically active outside of Twitter, including physically attending anti-Brexit events, indicating that they hold strong loyalty to the pro-EU community.

Many participants felt that Brexit had caused them to feel more European, which indicates that Brexit has been a “critical juncture” for fast and rapid identity change. This identity change has caused a disruption in many British participants’ nested identities as many felt they could not identify with their nationality, due to them fundamentally disagreeing with the nation’s decision. Therefore, for many British #FBPE users in this sample, Brexit has been a catalyst for claiming their European identity. #FBPE has been a space in which they can safely present their European identity and feel a sense of belonging to a community which holds solidarity with their anti-Brexit narrative, in a way they feel their nation does not. Twitter has provided a platform on which to present this identity, and this has resulted in a transnational community, constructed to spread a pro-EU narrative.

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