

# **Two Brexits on Twitter: English Sporting Identity and Euro 2016 as a Metaphor for a Divided Britain**

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## **Two Brexits on Twitter: English Sporting Identity and Euro 2016 as a Metaphor for a Divided Britain**

England's 'shock' exit from the Euro 2016 Football Championship and the UK electorate's decision to (Br)exit from the EU occurred almost simultaneously, providing an interesting lens through which to examine unfolding tensions in the UK and its component identities – all the more so given the presence of two of the three other component countries of the UK, Wales and Northern Ireland, at the Championship. Our analysis of 34,324 original tweets featuring both the hashtag #Euro2016 and #Brexit shows a clear tendency to conflate British and English identities in the context of Brexit, a conflation coloured by largely negative characteristics. We pay particular attention to how recurring themes concerning leadership, accountability and immigration are articulated in the context of both sporting and political events. In addition, we examine the significance of the structural logic of social media on these discussions of the sport-nation nexus, with reference to vortextuality and mediatisation.

## **Introduction**

Sport, national identity and the media have long been intertwined, with any notable shifts in one having significant impacts on the others.<sup>1</sup> It is with this in mind that we explore the relationship between the UK referendum vote on European Union (EU) membership and the UEFA European Football Championship that took place simultaneously in the summer of 2016, and the implications of how both events were discussed simultaneously on Twitter. The referendum was a watershed moment for British identity and the identities of the component countries of the UK. In the years since, Brexit has dominated debates about the nature of British identity with many attempts to inscribe an overarching meaning on the referendum decision and, thus, provide a coherent national narrative for a post-Brexit UK.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore instructive to return to the trigger event of the referendum and explore how discourses surrounding it were initially articulated with a view to extrapolating its long term consequences for British identity and the identities of the component countries which make up the UK. Furthermore, as sport is a uniquely powerful metaphor through which national identities are contested and articulated and a frequent vehicle for the imposition of national narratives,<sup>3</sup> we will examine the discourses on Brexit that emerged contemporaneously with the referendum through the prism of football. The quadrennial UEFA European Football Championship (hereafter referred to as the Euros) is the third biggest sporting event in the world<sup>4</sup> and the 2016 edition raised a novel irony in that the English national team was surprisingly eliminated from the European tournament within a couple of days of the UK voting to leave Europe, also a shock according to most polls at the time. England have been ‘surprisingly’ eliminated early from many national tournaments before this particular exodus. However, the political and cultural mood of the country following the Brexit vote made this one worthy of scrutiny in the context of a heated national identity discourse that dominated headlines and conversations across the UK. Additionally, the tournament featured the participation (and relative success) of the Welsh and Northern Irish teams, providing a prominent platform for the articulation of their national identities, within and beyond the overarching identity of Britishness.

Referencing the Twitter discourse that explicitly discussed both events in parallel, we focus on the 2016 European Championship (hereafter referred to as Euro 2016) as a metaphor from which to explore how both English and British identity were conflated and understood at the time of the vote. As mentioned above, the tournament featured the Welsh and Northern Irish teams as well as the English one; it therefore provides an ideal case study for analysing the extent to which Brexit discussion was coloured by English identity, as the tournament provided

two visible alternative perceptions of Britishness in the participation of these two other UK component countries. The tension arising from the increasingly blurring boundaries of Englishness and Britishness in the context of the Brexit upheaval has been much discussed in the popular press,<sup>5</sup> and has begun to be explored by academics, notably with an eye to the role of sport.<sup>6</sup> There remains ample room, however, to examine the extent to which these boundaries blurred during the referendum itself. Are subsequent attempts to frame Brexit as an English project merely post-facto discourses employed to make sense of upheaval, or were such discourses already at play during the referendum itself? Additionally, there is the role of the sport-social media nexus to explore, in examining how these discourses emerged. If the aforementioned conflation of Britishness and Englishness has coloured discussion of Brexit in the years since the referendum, how did sport offer a manifestation of such a discourse and how did social media shape the momentum of its articulation?

Twitter provides an ideal vehicle to assess the spontaneous development of such identity-conflating discourses. It offers illumination on the extent to which the idea of Brexit as a fundamentally English project is a post-hoc rationalisation by media observers or an underlying widely held public perception. Additionally, it allows us to explore the manner in which British identities were articulated during the referendum through the prism of sport. There is the logic of mediatisation to be examined: the nature of the impact of the structures of social media, such as Twitter, on the discourses on British identity/identities articulated over the course of Euro 2016. Anderson<sup>7</sup> has previously descried the importance of media to the concept of a shared national identity and the manner in which newspapers establish the parameters of what the relevant and pressing matters of a given nation are. Does the theoretically more spontaneous emergence of prominent discourses on social media destabilise those parameters and the national identity they underpin? Or are these discourses less spontaneous than they might appear, still functioning within established conceptions of national identity?

Ultimately, we argue that Brexit is viewed within the Twitter discourse as a definitively English project, and that the negative aspects associated with that particular project (e.g. anti-immigration) and the referendum that it entailed (e.g. complacency, lack of leadership and planning) were symbolically understood through England's humiliation on the sporting stage. And furthermore that these themes, which have figured so prominently in media discourses on Brexit in the years since, evolved and articulated at the time of the referendum itself through football, and gained discursive momentum through social media discussion energised by this major footballing event. To illustrate this discourse, we draw on a collection of 34,324 original

tweets featuring both the hashtag #Euro2016 and #Brexit to discuss three recurring themes - (a) two Brexits, (b) leadership and accountability, and (c) hooligans and problem immigrants in Britain and in Europe. Before we analyse these themes, we unpack the British/English sporting identity in the context of an increasingly fragmented union. Then, we develop theoretical insight of vortextual events, social media and the increasing contextual significance of the Euros as one of these events. Implications for English identity, British identity and its component identities are discussed.

### *Sport and British/English Identities*

Sport, particularly football, is one of the most prominent manifestations of national identity in a rapidly globalising world.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Rowe argues that among 'the ironies characterizing contemporary sport it is evident that, as sport becomes more global and transnational in nature, the national is constantly re-asserted as a locus of collective identification and as a space where sport – including association football ... is organized and practiced.'<sup>9</sup> Thus, sport's capacity to serve as a totem for ideas of national identity is all the more significant in a geo-political context which sees such ideas rendered increasingly unstable conceptually. Major international sporting events are therefore not merely significant socially and economically, but also culturally and politically in reiterating - and even, on occasion, reshaping - international perceptions of national identities.

The significance of the 'sport-nation nexus'<sup>10</sup> and the propensity for major sporting events to trigger greater public attention into it is particularly pertinent with relation to the UK. While politically the UK is a single entity, international sport (most notably football) offers a prominent platform for the realisation of the national identities that make up its component parts: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, recent decades have seen the perceived stability of the political and cultural union of the UK complicated by devolution and increasing scrutiny of the UK's historical legacy. Kumar discusses how the empire-building of the 19th century saw the identities of Britishness and Englishness tightly interwoven, before arguing that this began to unravel following the post-WWII decline of the British Empire, the UK's entry into the European Economic Community and the influx of migration from residents of former imperial colonies. A further factor in this shift came with the granting of devolution – national governing bodies – to the other British nations in 1997, which has since seen collective

British identity destabilised as the individual identities of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland grow more pronounced.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, England, while remaining the politically dominant entity within the UK, increasingly perceives itself as culturally isolated, unable to conceive an identity for itself distinct from that Britishness as effectively as the other component nations of the UK have. Skey sums up this developing tension, writing:

Britain's asymmetrical historical development, largely driven by the majority English, has meant that there are few established symbols of English identity beyond the sporting realm. In a post-devolution era, where symbols of Britain are becoming increasingly called into question, the English national football team has become one of the primary symbols of a new wave of English cultural nationalism. Since the late 1990s, support for the activities of English sporting teams has become increasingly visible, generally marked by the widespread display of national flags and coordinated public activities.<sup>12</sup>

Skey's assertions concerning the increasingly significant role that English sporting teams have come to play in platforming an identity distinct to Britishness has not gone unnoticed by the popular press, where contrasts have been drawn between England's famous 1966 World Cup victory in which the Union Jack was the predominant symbol among supporters and the more recent preponderance of St George's Cross symbol among fans, media and merchandisers during England's participation in events such as the World Cup and the Euros.<sup>13</sup> England's Euro 2020 final defeat to Italy attracted the highest TV audience of any UK broadcast since Princess Diana's funeral in 1997.<sup>14</sup> High profile England football matches have thus come to function as locus points for a latent desire among the English public to express and celebrate an identity distinct from that of Britishness. The question is how such dynamics are played out on the international sporting stage, in light of seismic changes that have occurred in recent years as a consequence of the EU referendum. In the face of a referendum on the political destiny as the UK as a whole, did the presence of the England team in Euro 2016 present the public with a totem for a distinct English identity, or did it contribute to the perception of Brexit as an English project?

### ***Brexit and Euro 2016: Vortextual Events***

Football, as the world's most widely played and watched sport often acts as a nexus of competing conceptions of national identity. This is particularly apparent - and significant - during vortextual sporting events. The term 'vortextuality' was coined by Gary Whannel who differentiated between regularly scheduled sporting events, which may attract sizeable audiences, but nonetheless occupy a limited space within the overall mediascape; and 'vortextual' sporting events which dominate the headlines, rendering it 'difficult for columnists and commentators to discuss anything else, even if they have no abiding interest.' During the course of such vortextual events 'the media agenda is compressed, and other topics either disappear or have to be connected to the vortextual event.'<sup>15</sup> Examples of sporting events which achieve vortextuality on an international scale would include the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup and the Euros.

Horne argues that the tournament can be seen as part of the "European ritual," in which the notion of a collective European identity is constructed and celebrated. However, within this collective continent-wide identity, identities of individual competing nations are highlighted, celebrated, debated and (re)constructed.<sup>16</sup> The propensity of the event to spark and shape debates around the national identity (and international reputation) of particular competing nations has been much discussed.<sup>17</sup> A significant example came early in the tournament's history when it was directly leveraged by totalitarian regimes as an opportunity for grandstanding: Spain forfeited a match against the Soviet Union in Euro 1960 on the insistence of General Franco's fascist government. Four years later they hosted the tournament and defeated the Soviets in the final, prompting Premier Nikita Khrushchev to fire his team's manager for 'let[ting] down the honour of the Soviet state.'<sup>18</sup> There have also been numerous examples of the tournament playing a significant role in the identity of nations in a way that owes more to the spontaneous confluence of the competition with wider political and cultural currents than to the ideological designs of certain regimes. Yugoslavia were infamously disqualified from the 1992 tournament as the nation dissolved into civil war, and the new nation-states which emerged from the conflict have used subsequent tournaments as an international platform for their fledgling national identities, such as Croatia impressing in a run to the quarter-finals of the 1996 edition (a mere five years after the nation declared its independence) and, more recently, North Macedonia establishing their nation's new name with a respectable showing at Euro 2020.

Euro 2016, in which England, Wales and Northern Ireland participated, occurring parallel with the UK referendum on EU membership, is therefore an ideal subject of analysis. Given the

vortextuality of the tournament, it was inevitable that it would be used as a lens through which to view contemporary political events by both mainstream and social media. However, the tension between a political event characterised by 'Britishness' (dependent on the collective voice of the UK electorate and determining the political future of the UK as a whole) and a sports event which functions to underline the differences between the identities that comprise 'Britishness' is particularly significant with regard to how this lens shapes public views. The referendum was a contentious affair which saw the UK as a whole vote to leave the EU despite a majority of voters within both Scotland and Northern Ireland opting to remain. In the years since, much discussion in the popular media has focused on exploring the motivations behind the result and the wider Brexit project. There has been a significant focus - both in the UK and international media - on a perceived nostalgia for the British Empire<sup>19</sup> and specifically on the idea of this imperial nostalgia being an 'English project,' an attempt to reclaim a sense of identity and a place of prominence in a post-colonial, multicultural world.<sup>20</sup> Journalist Patrick Coburn observed that 'English people often have [a] muddled or myopic vision of their own nationalism, using the terms "English" and "British" as if they were synonymous or marked a distinction of no great account' while espousing a 'new nationalism is much more appropriate to an English nation state than to a more diverse United Kingdom.'<sup>21</sup> There thus exists a tension between the political entity of the UK - theoretically united by a construct of a shared sense of 'Britishness' - and the distinct cultural identities of its component parts: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There is therefore much to be revealed in examining the perception of Brexit as a product driven by English nationalism through the lens of a major football-media event, which not only paralleled the EU referendum, but which also offered three of the four component countries of the UK a platform for the expression and celebration of their distinct cultural identities.

Furthermore, that the discussion triggered by the confluence of these significant political and cultural events played out in – among other forums – the setting of social media is particularly significant. Mediatisation, 'the process whereby culture and society to an increasing degree become dependent on the media and their logic,'<sup>22</sup> is an important consideration in our investigation, with regard to how the structural logic of social media shapes discussion on Euro 2016 and Brexit. Social media discourse is theoretically more spontaneous and decentralised than that of traditional media. However, boyd argues that the structures of social media platforms foster an attention economy in which users are encouraged to reiterate and recirculate popular sentiments rather than articulate on original topics, thus fostering a sort of discursive



snowball effect. This opens questions about the democratising potential of social media's scalability.<sup>23</sup> Whannel initially discussed vortextual sport in the context of traditional, professional media and it is worth examining how such events shape discussion on the nominally more organic and less organised spaces of social media. Whannel himself noted that social media exacerbates the process, speeding up 'the feedback loop of the media' through the greater 'virtual and interactive involvement' of the audience.<sup>24</sup> While the attention devoted to a vortextual event can only ever be limited in its timeframe,<sup>25</sup> the discourses emerging from such an event can endure for longer. With regard to a vortextual event such as the Euros, which provides ample opportunity for the reshaping of national identities,<sup>26</sup> this greater capacity for involvement from audiences could have significant impact in magnifying, undermining or distorting the discourses on British identity propagated by the leaders of the Leave and Remain campaigns.

### **Research Setting & Method**

The empirical context for this study is Twitter. As an open social networking site, Twitter facilitates the connection, sharing and consumption of content between both acquaintances and strangers.<sup>27</sup> In particular, hashtags enable Twitter users to identify others with similar and opposing views and form *ad hoc* and calculated publics around a specific hashtag.<sup>28</sup> In the football context, research suggests that Twitter is used as a so-called second screen to gather information, express emotional responses,<sup>29</sup> and communicate with others. Not only is it widely used by those interested in politics and football,<sup>30</sup> it has been used by football fans to promote social movements and express political views.<sup>31</sup> In 2016, over 17% of the UK population used Twitter daily.<sup>32</sup> During the focal period it was a popular medium for discourse for both Brexit and Euro 2016.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, it was deemed both a relevant and appropriate empirical context for this study.

Twitter's enterprise API platform, GNIP, was used to prepare a dataset of all English language tweets featuring the hashtag '#Brexit' from the announcement of the referendum on 23 February 2016 until 23 July 2016, one month after the vote. This master 'Brexit dataset' comprised 10,651,454 tweets generated from 2,198,309 unique screen-names (accounts), and featured 206,032 unique hashtags. Starting from the master dataset, 34,324 original tweets featuring the hashtags relating to the Euro 2016 dataset were extracted using Google Big Query and R. An initial exploratory data analysis combining topic analysis and network analysis was

implemented. More specifically, an preliminary list of topics were identified using a bag-of-word approach while network analysis was used to investigate how these topics were linked together. Finally, tweets and corresponding classification were reviewed manually for sensemaking and to identify recurring themes in the data. This process led to us to identify three main themes which we labelled - (a) Two Brexits, (b) Leadership and Accountability, and (c) Hooligans and Problem Immigrants in Britain and in Europe. Based on these themes, a final dataset of 6,527 original tweets was constructed. This final dataset was subjected to peak detection analysis and a qualitative thematic analysis to unpack some of the underlying significance of these recurring sub-themes as they relate to the overarching theme of ‘Two Brexits.’ The constant comparison method was used to code the data.<sup>34</sup>

Three collections of tweets were used for the final analysis which we label (1) Two Brexits - tweets comparing the Brexit referendum and England’s exit from Euro 2016 (3,041 original tweets generated by 2,996 unique accounts); (2) Leadership and Accountability - tweets comparing UK political leadership with football team management of home nation teams in Euro 2016 (1,664 original tweets generated by 1,594 unique accounts); and (3) Hooligans and Immigrants - tweets relating to hooligans and comparing attitudes towards foreign nationals in the UK and in a football context (336 original tweets generated 314 by unique accounts). From these collections, an iterative approach was used to identify further sub-themes.

## **Two Brexits**

The reference to England’s shock exit to Iceland in Euro 2016 as a second Brexit featured in our collection of original tweets over three thousand times. The confluence of the two events was characterised by the irony and humorousness of England achieving this unique ignominy, but also by the shame involved. Table 1 below provides sample tweets of the ironic and sarcastic remarks that were made at their expense. Such reactions were largely shorn of any clear political or ideological nuances, though it could be argued that (within an English context, at least) those making them are more likely to be ‘remainers’ rather than ‘leavers’, as the latter group would regard the two exits from Europe as being entirely different in character: one triumphant, the other embarrassing.

*Table 1: Exemplar tweets - Two Brexits: Sarcastic and ironic Humor*

Que [sic] the #Brexit jokes for #ENG after exiting #EURO2016 in embarrassing fashion against #ISL

So now that #Euro2016 is over we can agree that #Brexit was just England's way of avoiding another humiliation in 2020.

Ehm... Did anyone explain to England players that #Brexit wasn't about #EURO2016? #ENGICE #embarrassing

England. Loves leaving Europe so much, did it twice in one week. #EURO2016 #Brexit

That's the #brexit plan for you right there. #ENGISL #EURO2016

It is notable how widespread the perception of Brexit as an English project is within the tweets that make fun of the situation. Clearly, in political terms, the first of these exits was not solely an English decision, but one taken collectively by the electorate of the UK. However, when analysing the level of shame and embarrassment (see sample tweets in Table 2) projected on Twitter, we can once again see the tacit perception that Brexit was an event driven by, and pertaining solely to, England. This supports the assertion that English identity is often conflated with British identity,<sup>35</sup> and it is particularly noteworthy since, as many of the tweets indicate, it is not only the English guilty of this tacit conflation but outside observers as well, as many of the tweets discuss England and Brexit in a detached – or even celebratory – manner that appears to indicate an outsider perspective.

*Table 2: Exemplar tweets - Two Brexits and embarrassment/shame*

Is it me or did England exercise article 50 at half time? Not sure what I'm most ashamed of. #euro2016 #brexit

As a friend tweeted "haven't been this embarrassed to be English since Friday" #brexit #EURO2016 #ENGICE

I've never been more embarrassed to be an England fan. little England drag us out of Europe twice in one week #Brexit #ENGICE #EURO2016

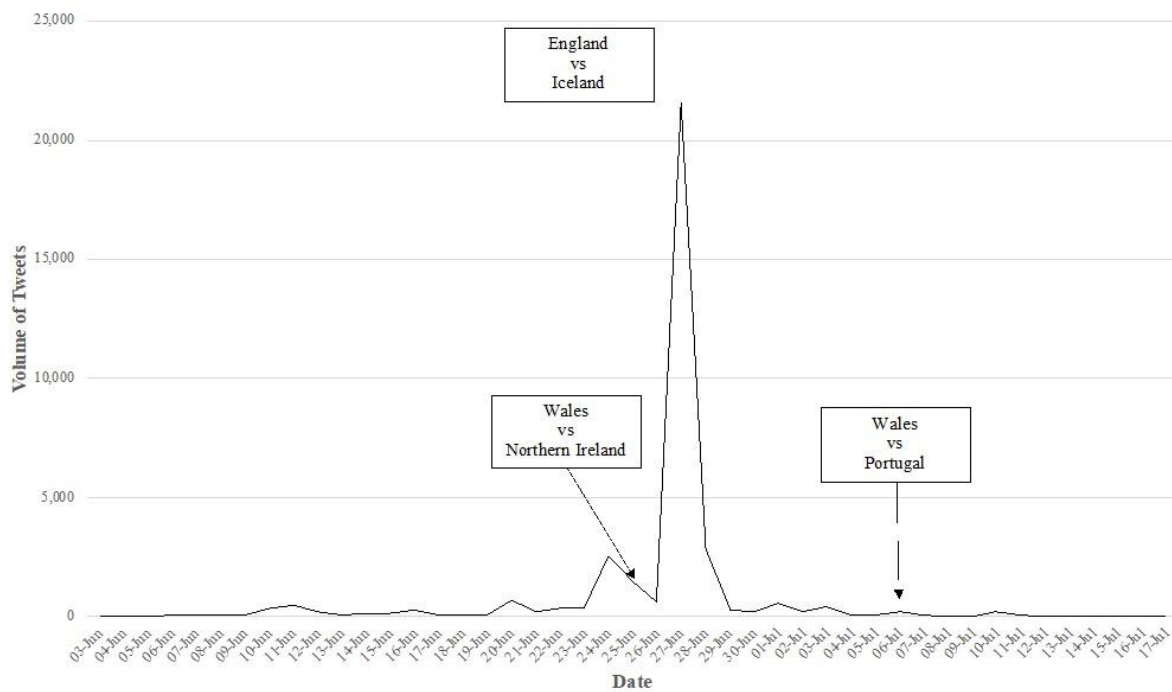
England exiting Europe twice in the span of one week because once wasn't humiliating enough! #brexit #euro2016

England out of the Euros twice in a week. #GetIn #EURO2016 #Brexit

As can be viewed in the daily frequency analysis below (Figure 1), Northern Ireland and Wales games received nowhere near as many tweets comparing their Euro 2016 games with the referendum. English games would of course ordinarily receive more (social) media attention as they have a much larger population and their squad generally features considerably more international stars than those of Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the daily frequency analysis (see Figure 1) shows an enormous disparity between the vast amount of tweets conflating England's exit from Euro 2016 with Brexit, compared to the much smaller amounts of analogous tweets about Northern Ireland's and Wales' elimination from the tournament. This is all the more notable given that Northern Ireland's elimination occurred just two days after the referendum. Wales' defeat occurred over two weeks later, but given that a majority of Welsh voters opted to leave the EU, the team could also be viewed as an exemplar of Brexit. However, this significant disparity could perhaps be explained by Northern Ireland and Wales both performing well above pre-tournament expectations. There was no shame associated with their particular exits. There are tweets that refer to Wales knocking Northern Ireland out of Europe for the second time in a week after the former defeated the latter one nil in a second round tie - a reference to the fact that the majority of Northern Irish voters voted to remain within the EU, while – as noted above – the majority of Welsh voters voted to leave it. While such tweets point toward a perspective on Brexit that stretches beyond the lens of English identity, they also further serve to underline the tension between the political entity of the UK

and the component identities that make it up. Through their teams performing well at Euro 2016, Wales and Northern Ireland prove to be a poor fit for social media users keen to joke about the UK and Brexit. Brexit campaigners and subsequent government figures have argued that leaving the EU represents a better future for all of the UK, regardless of the voting preferences of a particular region; but the Welsh, Northern Irish and English identities mobilised by Euro 2016 cannot so easily be reconciled within one, agreeable whole.

*Figure 1. Daily Frequency Analysis*



### **Leadership and Accountability**

The conceptual fusion of the two exits is extended thematically within the discourse to the concepts of leadership and accountability. Again, there is a clear trend of users noting (or joking about) the parallels between UK Prime Minister David Cameron resigning in the wake of the referendum result and England manager Roy Hodgson resigning immediately after the team’s defeat to Iceland (see sample tweets in Table 3). Hodgson is cast sarcastically as an ideal negotiator for Brexit, and both Cameron and Hodgson’s resignations are deemed as the appropriate cost for their respective losses or as further example of a failure to provide leadership at a time of crisis. While the proximity of these two events make such comparisons

inevitable, it is again notable that these tweets conflate Britain and England – only eighteen out of the almost 35k tweets, make any mention of the managers of the Welsh and Northern Irish teams (Chris Coleman and Michael O’Neill, respectively).

*Table 3: Exemplar tweets - Hodgson and Cameron*

Roy Hodgson is the David Cameron of soccer: embarrassed into resignation. #Brexit #EURO2016
Hodgson for PM!!! at least he had prepared plan [statement] for #EURO2016 #brexit unlike most UK MPs”
If this score stands Hodgson should follow Cameron's example & resign for taking us out of Europe #Brexit #EURO2016 Come on #ENG
Roy #Hodgson should just honourably do a @David_Cameron #EURO2016 #ENGICE ... #EngXit #Brexit”
Why, when the going gets tough, do the leaders resign; David Cameron on #brexit and now Roy Hodgson #Eng #Euro2016 time for #BorisJohnson

The theme of leadership and accountability can be further understood in the context of discussion concerning other key Brexit referendum protagonists on the leave side of the debate (i.e. Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage). Despite their success in winning the referendum, they are also compared to Hodgson (see Table 4 below). The comparison here places emphasis on the lack of planning and complacency (see sample tweets below in Table 5). These recurring notions further underlines the subtle amalgamation of Brexit and Englishness. Complacency was not a charge levelled at Northern Ireland or, later, Wales following their exits from the tournament. Complacency implies confidence and the squandering of potential advantages. Both Cameron’s government - for calling the referendum on EU membership and campaigning

ineffectively against Brexit - and the Leave side - for campaigning on the basis of bombast and sensationalist rhetoric rather than detailed plans for the UK's post EU future - are denounced as complacently overconfident in the power and prestige of the British state. As relative underdogs, the defeats of Northern Ireland and Wales are not seen as comparable to the perceived hubris of the British political establishment.

*Table 4: Exemplar tweets - Brexit campaign leaders*

What if Roy was actually Farage in disguise? #EURO2016 #Brexit #England
How much would the #NHS recieve if we gave them @Nigel_Farage and Hodgsons wages ever week? #remain #ENGISL #EURO2016 #Brexit
Only if Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson had a foolproof plan like Roy Hodgson to get out of Europe. #Brexit #EURO2016
Get Hodgson and Neville out, and Boris, Farage and Gove in... #Brexit #england #englandvsiceland #EURO2016
#Farage resigns as #UKIP leader, #BorisJohnson pinches: Brit. politics in these days is as botched as Englands football. #brexit #EURO2016

In the years since the referendum, British politics has seen frequent leadership crises – with three Prime Ministers resigning within six years (2016-2022). In post-Brexit UK, leadership has remained a going concern. It is therefore instructive to see that discourses in the lead-up to, and immediate wake of, the referendum depict a lack of leadership as a key failing in British politics and English football. Politicians have long reached for sporting discourse in order to portray themselves and their policies as more substantive, engaging and direct.<sup>36</sup> However, here we see that this tactic is something of a double-edged sword: through occupying the same

perceptual ground as footballers and coaches, politicians are judged on the same exacting and impatient standards by which failure calls for immediate punishment.<sup>37</sup>

*Table 5: Exemplar tweets - Complacency and lack of planning*

Complacency, stupidity & poor leadership. Sound familiar? #ENGICE #EURO2016 #EUref #Brexit #Remain
All the caterwauling and flag waving cannot conceal the lack of strategy, leadership; vision."#ComeOnIceland #Brexit #EngIce #EURO2016
Hodgson had as much clue about tactics as the Leave campaign does about planning for the future out of the EU #Brexit #Euro2016 #ENG #ENGISL
"Hodgson, the only man in England with a coherent plan for leaving Europe." #brexit #euro2016
UK, Tories, Labour, FA, Boris , Hodgson, Farage "Overpaid nonces" bloody hell this country is imploding itself #England #EURO2016 #brexit
Another #Brexit well deserved for arrogant and foolish #England #EURO2016 #ENGISL

### **Hooligans and Problem Immigrants in Britain and in Europe**

Given the extent to which media coverage (both on social and traditional media) over the course of the referendum campaign were focused on debates surrounding immigration, it is unsurprising that references to the issue were a recurring feature in tweets across the course of Euro 2016. The emphasis on the ‘problem’ immigrants of other nations competing at the tournament, the irony of English hooligan fans committing violent crimes and calling for Brexit



on French soil and the cosmopolitan nature of European football were three of the dominant themes identified.

Turkish and Romanian citizens in particular were characterised as problem immigrants by elements of the British media and the political establishment in the run up to Brexit. This was replicated in tweets about their games in Euro 2016 (see sample tweets in Table 6 below). It should be noted that while Turkey is not a member of the EU and Turkish fans could not enjoy seamless travel to France for the tournament, the spectre of Turkey joining the organisation was continually invoked before and during the Brexit referendum by Leave campaigners.<sup>38</sup> In a similar fashion, Romanian fans at the tournament are described as emblematic of the perceived problems with how EU membership had facilitated the immigration of Eastern Europeans into the UK. The role of an international tournament in manifesting the abstract notion of national identities through vivid symbols (fans, teams, flags, colours, etc.) is leveraged by these Twitter users as a tangible example of the supposed threat of free movement of immigrants around Europe.

*Table 6: Exemplar tweets - Immigrants*

Turkish 'football fans' announce arrival #Euro2016 baseball bats meat cleavers #BREXIT #LEAVEEU #VOTELEAVE
Romania crash out of #EURO2016 on the up side it's only a short trip home to the UK #Brexit #VoteLeave
#EURO2016 #CROTUR Turkey? In Europe? I thought @David_Cameron said they're not allowed in Europe? He just can't help himself. #Brexit!!!!
#EURO2016 TERROR ATTACK COULD PUSH BRITONS TO VOTE OUT. #brexit #VoteLeave #comeonengland #ukip #tory

#Ramadan in #Belgium: 2 Muslims arrested, planned jihad attack at #EURO2016 game  
#BELHUN #BEL #HUN #BBCnews #BRexit

There had been notable incidents across the group stage of the tournament, the week before the referendum, which had seen elements of English support clash with Russian fans, Marseille locals and the French police. Our analysis reveals recurring ideological connotations in the discussion of these incidents. Notably many saw these violent clashes as redolent of the perceived xenophobia and jingoism of Brexit. The hooligans were often compared with Brexit voters (see Table 7 below for sample tweets), both in symbolic terms (outlining a clear parallel between the senseless destruction of hooliganism and the perceived nationalistic grandstanding of Brexit) and literal terms (speculating or asserting that all or most of the hooligans were Brexit voters). Such conflation reduces the politics of the Brexiters to tribal violence, ultimately embarrassing the very identity it purports to be fighting for.

*Table 7: Exemplar tweets - English hooligans and violence*

Is it fanciful to link the wilder elements of English hooligans at #EURO2016 with their counterparts in the #Brexit campaign? #EUref

#callitforEngland Bet 95% at least of those England "fans" currently disgracing their nation back #brexit. #StrongerIn #EURO2016

English fans prove Nigel Farage right about an influx of violent immigrants though maybe in a slightly different way #EURO2016 #Brexit

BLOODY REFUGEES → stealing our jobs and living on welfare.. Oh, wait #Marseilles  
#EURO2016 #hooligans #Brexit

One positive of #Brexit is that the racist #ENG hooligans will find it difficult to gather proper paperwork to make it to the next #EURO2016

After all crap from #ENG fans at #EURO2016 you wonder would Europe vote for #Brexit given the chance

Europe now hoping for a #brexit so they can clamp down on illegal immigration from unticketed @England fans #EURO2016

It is, however, largely in keeping with popular European perceptions of Britain in the wake of Brexit: ‘the British mentality [is perceived] as resting on the historical experience of empire, where Europe is constructed as Britain’s ‘Other’ [...] Brexit represents a shift in perception of what Britishness means abroad, defining Brexit and post-Brexit Britain as based on irrationality and intolerance.’<sup>39</sup> In such a context, the violence of the hooligans is perceived as an extension of this imperial British mentality in which opposition to Europe is taken as a given and symbolic conquest is aspired to. In fact, there was considerable attention paid to speculation about the opinion of Europeans on Brexit in the wake of English hooliganism. The general tenor of these tweets (see Table 7) was that the hooligans were damaging Britain’s reputation in Europe. These tweets would imply that regardless of the result of the referendum, England (again, Brexit belongs to England in this discussion) will be viewed by Europe as a source of strife. Hooliganism at Euro 2016 is thus viewed by these users as politics by proxy, despite the lack of clear ideological motivations for the fighting.

Although much of the discourse surrounding immigration took place with fan behaviour and the structure of the tournament in mind, the ethnic and national background of the actual players that represented England (and other teams) were also a focus of attention in the tweets we analysed. Almost the entire starting eleven of the English team (six of which are people of colour) that played against Iceland were either born outside England, or have parents or grandparents that emigrated to England from Jamaica, Nigeria or Ireland. The tweets we found, likely posted by remainers, were typically sarcastic in tone, with their purpose appearing to be to highlight the ludicrousness of the vilification of immigrants during the referendum campaign

occurring in parallel to a tournament (and indeed, a sport more widely) that highlights the positives of European cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. Despite pitting nations against one another in a competitive sporting environment, some users (see Table 8) saw Euro 2016 as a positive platform for national identity. Immigration, a fraught issue throughout the referendum campaign, characterised by ‘drama, hysteria and anxieties of irregular migration practices in the EU and focused on the fear of the “Other”’<sup>40</sup> is viewed through the prism of football as being associated with international stars and cosmopolitan competitions.

*Table 8: Exemplar tweets - Cosmopolitan football*

I wonder if #brexit voting #eng fans will have an issue with Hodgson's replacement being an immigrant like a Hiddink, or Löw etc üdÇ #EURO2016
Best footballers in Britain not British,in Spain not Spanish; France not French.They're immigrants #racism #RefugeeCrisis #Brexit #EURO2016
#Ozil scored for #Germany #EURO2016 l. Check it out #BorisJohnson #brexit , Ozil is 3rd generation Turkish #immigrant
#EURO2016 the games = #VoteRemain whereas Hooliganism = #Brexit #bbcqt
English fans blame immigrants for #Euro2016 exit #brexit
BREAKING NEWS: ENGLAND BLAMES IMMIGRANTS FOR LETTING IN ONE TOO MANY GOALS!! #BREXIT #ENGLEXIT #EURO2016 #ENG #ENGICE

Such conceptions – of English fan-hooligans as endemic of Brexit and international football competitions as offering a more hopeful potential for national identities and international relations – have been a common feature of the discourses surrounding England’s participation in major football tournaments in the years since the referendum.<sup>41</sup> England – and the England

football team – continue to be a key prism through which the implications of Brexit are interpreted. England’s regular participation in such vortextual sporting events provide further opportunity for the growth and acceleration of these discourses across social media.

### **Football, (Social) Mediatiation and National Identity**

The nature of vortextual sporting events meant that it was inevitable that Euro 2016 would function as a lens through which other prominent contemporary events would be discussed across the media. Whannel argues that internationally televised vortextual sporting events have a disperse quality, as they have become unmoored (or even alienated) from the stadium-bound in-person experience: ‘Did the World Cup take place in the stadium or in the bars, parks, clubs, and beaches and in front of giant communal screens around the world?’<sup>42</sup> This process has exacerbated alongside the growth of social media as a site for consumption and discussion of vortextual events; these events – and the discourses emerging from them – now ‘take place’ not only on communal screens but on communal online platforms such as Twitter. boyd asserts that ‘in an environment where following the content of one’s friends involves the same technologies as observing the follies of a celebrity, individuals find themselves embedded in the attention economy, as consumers and producers.’<sup>43</sup> With this in mind, we see from our findings that vortextual events accrue even greater prominence as users leverage them in an attempt to flourish within the attention economy, generating a discursive momentum among the emerging themes and opinions. This is a consequence of the mediatiation of sport; ‘the expanding influence of media institutions, practices, and technologies’ on conceptions and structures of sport.<sup>44</sup> Events such as the Euros, which – as argued above – have long functioned as a site for the perpetuation and reshaping of national identity, are now even more chaotic battlegrounds for competing discourses on national identity within the attention economy of social media.

Several of the tweets analysed in the wake of England’s defeat to Iceland feature users commenting on the inevitability of jokes comparing the match to Brexit. It is a stark illustration of the snowball effects of social media’s attention economy on prevailing discourses. The abiding perception of Brexit as an English project, much noted in the popular press in the years since the referendum, grew in the immediate aftermath of England’s defeat within a context that promised users the ‘possibility of tremendous visibility’<sup>45</sup> for contributing to a popular discourse. These later discussions of this topic in established media outlets<sup>46</sup> were not mere

post-hoc rationalisations of an unexpected political event, but an articulation of a perception that – as evidenced by the Twitter discourse – clearly attained widespread public prominence in the days immediately preceding and following the referendum. Modern vortextual international sporting events such as Euro 2016 incentivise social media users to comment on national identities spotlighted in the event, with few concerns for coherence or consistency. The conceptions of national identity crystalised during online discussion of vortextual sporting events endure long after the events themselves. Delia and Armstrong wrote about how social media posed a problem for companies in facilitating a public forum in which consumer discussion can reshape brand narratives in spontaneous and unexpected manners.<sup>47</sup> The same could be said with regard to national identity, all the more so in the events examined here, wherein both sides of the Brexit referendum based many of their arguments on competing visions of British identity.<sup>48</sup> Vortextual sporting events have always been a double-edged sword to national identities, potentially galvanising national unity while also providing the risk of undermining perceived national characteristics. The Twitter discourse conflating Brexit and England’s embarrassment at Euro 2016 is illustrative of the heightening of such risks when the sport-nation nexus is filtered through the structural logic of social media.

## **Conclusion**

In June 2016 two events with major implications for British identity took place. Firstly, the EU referendum, deciding not only the UK’s political future but also significant implications for its citizens’ view of their nation’s identity. Secondly, Euro 2016, the first major international football tournament in thirty years to feature three British teams. It was inevitable, given the event-driven nature of social media discussion, that the two would be compared in online discussions. We used the lens of Euro 2016 as a metaphor from which to explore how both English and British identities were conflated and understood at the time of the vote.

Brexit is viewed as an English project and England’s sporting humiliation can be viewed as an almost perfect metaphor for Brexit. We see this, not only quantitatively in that discussion of Brexit during the tournament in the context of the England team is far greater than discussion in the context of games involving Northern Ireland and Wales, but more significantly, thematically, where there is an abiding view of Englishness as being characterised by belligerence, shame, xenophobia and complacency. Discussion in the years since in media and political spheres which emphasised the ‘Englishness’ of the Brexit project<sup>49</sup> are bolstered by

the documentation of this discourse emerging among the general public of Twitter users at the time of the referendum itself. Our findings attest to the prominent perception of Brexit as a largely English project in which the other component nations of the UK are disregarded. This is not merely a post-hoc rationalisation of media commentators, but an idea that was clearly felt and expressed by the wider public at the very time of the referendum itself.

Tweets of these negative characteristics, seen as applying to both events with users conflating shame over England's loss to Iceland and the violent behaviour of a minority of their fans with shame over the result of the referendum, feature little or no acknowledgement that what is being discussed are actually two distinct if overlapping identities: Englishness and Britishness. Ghassan Hage coined the term 'national cultural capital' to describe how certain characteristics, tastes and qualities come to be seen as more redolent of 'authentic' national identity than others: 'national belonging tends to be proportional to accumulated national capital.'<sup>50</sup> Hage uses the term to refer to the cultural status of migrants and minority ethnic groups within a country, but it is a particularly useful concept when analysing the tensions between 'Britishness' and the component nations which make up the UK. From our findings we argue that within the context of British identity, Englishness possesses the most national cultural capital, being seen (by the English themselves and by outside observers) as 'more [British] than others'<sup>51</sup> - in this case, those others being Welshness, Scottishness and Northern Irishness. This would appear to be the case both in domestic and international perceptions. However, in the wake of Brexit and England's embarrassing exit from Euro 2016, this Britishness dominated by Englishness may not be an identity which Welsh, Scottish or Northern Irish people yearn for over that of their own component country. Northern Ireland, whose international reputation was so long dominated by the Troubles, were celebrated at Euro 2016 for the joyful bonhomie of their fans, winning the Medal of Paris (jointly with their Republic of Ireland counterparts) for 'exemplary behaviour and sportsmanship.'<sup>52</sup> Wales' surprise run to the semi-finals of the tournament saw them becoming internationally hailed as adventurous overachievers. Thus, with British identity characterised by international denunciation and domestic rancour in the wake of Brexit, some of the component identities supposedly contained within it threatened to transcend it. Indeed, 2021 Census results in Northern Ireland showed an 8.1% decrease in the amount of people identifying solely as British compared to previous records in 2011.<sup>53</sup> As Mauro argues 'mediated sport events provide also a venue for the idea of the nation to be challenged and upgraded.'<sup>54</sup> Subsequent and future football tournaments could well function as sites for Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish identities to be 'upgraded' while British identity is 'challenged'

and perhaps even destabilised. With the European Championship now expanded to 24 teams and subsequent FIFA World Cups (from 2026 onwards) expanding to 48 teams, it is far more likely that forthcoming international football tournaments will feature multiple British teams, and therefore provide an intriguing platform from which to analyse the conflicted nature of post-Brexit British identity.

Skey argues that one of the key appeals of nationalism and national identity is the security it offers against a sense of chaos and uncertainty that so often pervades modern life.<sup>55</sup> For the modern UK public, in the years since Brexit, this uncertainty has, if anything increased, with heated negotiations between EU and British officials lasting for several years, and subsequent international crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic further undermining UK unity.<sup>56</sup> With the structural logic of social media encouraging reiteration of prominent discourses (such as the conflation of Englishness and Britishness) it is likely that the international sporting theatre will offer little chance to bolster the sense of security around British identity, but rather further fragment its component identities through the teams that represent them. There is, therefore, ample scope to follow Clavane and Long<sup>57</sup> in examining how subsequent successful England performances at vortextual football events (such as their run to the semi-finals of the 2018 World Cup or reaching the final of Euro 2020) are interpreted in terms of Brexit. Given that negotiations lasted until January 2020 (and indeed, complications regarding the Irish border are still arousing dispute at the time of writing), Brexit has continued to be a persistent talking point in the UK media since 2016. It is quite likely that analysis of social media discussion (or indeed, mainstream media discussion) of England's performances in those two tournaments would be rich with references to Brexit (if not quite so omnipresent as they were during Euro 2016) and offer fresh insights into the evolving conceptions of English and British identity in the years since Brexit.

Furthermore, there is potential 'to explore the potentially transformative [effect] of new digital technologies for [football], as well as its socially regressive impact'<sup>58</sup> through similar analysis of the unfolding social media reaction to the performances of other international football teams at recent major tournaments. The recent resurgence of right-wing nationalism calls into question the extent to which such international football tournaments can act as a platform for expressing conceptions of national identity alternative to this contemporary jingoism. Analysing social media reaction to a multi-ethnic French team triumphing in the 2018 World Cup just over a year after the presidential bid of far-right, anti-immigrant candidate, Marine Le Pen, for instance, could explore the country's complex relationship with race and national



identity. Such analyses offer football scholars the opportunity to examine the discourses emerging from sporting mega events in greater quantity and with more nuance than the previous reliance on mainstream media commentary, while remaining duly critical of how ‘organic’ or ‘spontaneous’ such prominent social media discourses actually are. Furthermore, given that growth in digital communication in football brings together one of the most tangible manifestations of the nation state through platforms characterised by a trans-national techno-libertarian ethos, examining the tensions in these relationships through other vortextual football media events would add greatly to the field of football studies. Through such examinations, researchers can follow Lawrence and Crawford in advocating a questioning of received orthodoxies of football scholarship in the face of the upheavals brought on by prevailing digitalisation,<sup>59</sup> through exploration of the collision between the accelerated volatility of online communication and the deeply held associations between team and identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Rowe, *Sport, Culture and the Media*.

<sup>2</sup> Zappettini and Krzyżanowski, ‘The Critical Juncture Of Brexit In Media & Political Discourses’; McTague, ‘How Britain Falls Apart’; Parnell, ‘Unravelling the Global Britain vision?’

<sup>3</sup> Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism and Globalisation*; Maguire, ‘Globalization, Sport and National Identities’; Malcolm, ‘Figuring Freddie: Andrew Flintoff, The Ashes And English National Identity.’

<sup>4</sup> Horne, ‘Material and representational legacies of sports mega-events: The case of the UEFA EURO Football Championships from 1996 to 2008.’

<sup>5</sup> Coburn, ‘Brexit unleashed an English nationalism that has damaged the union with Scotland for good’; Mackay, ‘Brexit speaks of the death shudders of English nationalism – and the coming of independence.’

<sup>6</sup> Clavane and Long, ‘Bigger than ourselves: the Southgate narrative and the search for a sense of common purpose’; Malcolm, ‘Cricket, Brexit and the Anglosphere.’

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 34-35.

<sup>8</sup> Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism and Globalisation*; Poulton and Maguire, ‘Plastic or Fantastic Brits?’; Liston and Kitching, “‘Our wee country’”: national identity, golf and “Ireland.”

<sup>9</sup> Rowe, ‘The Mediated Nation and the Transnational Football Fan,’ 693.

<sup>10</sup> Falcous, ‘The Decolonizing National Imaginary,’ 375.

<sup>11</sup> Kumar, ‘English and British National Identity in Comparative Perspective’; Skey, ‘The changing status of the ‘majority’ English in post-devolution Britain.’

<sup>12</sup> Skey, ‘The Routine Flagging of Nationhood Across the Visual Environment,’ 275-276.

<sup>13</sup> Goldblatt, ‘How the England football team came to embody Englishness.’

<sup>14</sup> Waterson, ‘Euro 2020 final attracts estimated 31 million TV audience in UK.’

<sup>15</sup> Whannel, ‘Television and the Transformation of Sport,’ 211.

<sup>16</sup> Horne, ‘Material and representational legacies of sports mega-events: The case of the UEFA EURO Football Championships from 1996 to 2008.’

<sup>17</sup> O’Boyle and Kearns, ‘The Greening of Euro 2016’; Mutz, ‘Football-related patriotism in Germany and the 2016 UEFA Euro.’

<sup>18</sup> O’Brien, *Euro Summits: The Story of the UEFA European Championship*, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Lorcin, ‘The Nostalgias for Empire.’

<sup>20</sup> Mackay, ‘Brexit speaks of the death shudders of English nationalism – and the coming of independence.’

<sup>21</sup> Coburn, ‘Brexit unleashed an English nationalism that has damaged the union with Scotland for good.’

<sup>22</sup> Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*, 153.

<sup>23</sup> boyd, ‘Social Network Sites as Networked Publics.’

<sup>24</sup> Whannel, ‘The Paradoxical Character of Live Television Sport in the Twenty-First Century,’ 773.

<sup>25</sup> Whannel, ‘Television and the Transformation of Sport.’

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<sup>26</sup> Horne, 'Material and representational legacies of sports mega-events: The case of the UEFA EURO Football Championships from 1996 to 2008.'

<sup>27</sup> Lynn et al, 'Towards a General Framework for Social Media Research Using Big Data.'

<sup>28</sup> Bruns and Bruggess, 'The use of Twitter hashtags in the formation of ad hoc publics'; Suiter et al, 'The role of social media in driving participation and engagement in referendums.'

<sup>29</sup> Jones et al, 'Just a game? Changes in English and Spanish soccer fans' emotions in the 2010 World Cup.'

<sup>30</sup> Jungherr, 'Twitter in politics: a comprehensive literature review'; Fan et al, 'Twitter-based BIRGING: Big Data analysis of English national team fans during the 2018 FIFA World Cup.'

<sup>31</sup> Irak, 'Shoot some pepper gas at me!'

<sup>32</sup> Statista, 'Age distribution of Twitter users in Great Britain from May 2013 to July 2016.'

<sup>33</sup> MacMillan, '12 great examples from across Europe of how brands got involved with #EURO2016'; Grčar et al, 'Stance and influence of Twitter users regarding the Brexit referendum'; Hänska-Ahy et al, 'Tweeting for Brexit'; North et al, 'Battle for Britain: Analyzing events as drivers of political tribalism in Twitter discussions of Brexit.'

<sup>34</sup> See Spiggle,

<sup>35</sup> Kumar, 'English and British National Identity in Comparative Perspective'; Skey, 'The changing status of the 'majority' English in post-devolution Britain.'

<sup>36</sup> Kearns, 'A Game Of Two Halves.'

<sup>37</sup> See Fry et al, 'Managing performance expectations in association football.'

<sup>38</sup> Erlanger, 'Britain's "Brexit" Debate Inflamed by Worries That Turkey Will Join E.U.'

<sup>39</sup> Adler-Nissen et al, 'Performing Brexit,' 577.

<sup>40</sup> Martins, 'News media representation on EU immigration before Brexit,' 6.

<sup>41</sup> Clavane and Long, 'Bigger than ourselves: the Southgate narrative and the search for a sense of common purpose.'

<sup>42</sup> Whannel, 'Television and the Transformation of Sport,' 213.

<sup>43</sup> boyd, 'Social Network Sites as Networked Publics,' 52.

<sup>44</sup> Hutchins, 'Live stadium sports events, mediatization, and the non-use of mobile media,' 422.

<sup>45</sup> boyd, 'Social Network Sites as Networked Publics,' 48.

<sup>46</sup> Coburn, 'Brexit unleashed an English nationalism that has damaged the union with Scotland for good'; Johns, 'Brexit identity politics and English nationalism will destroy the UK'; Mackay, 'Brexit speaks of the death shudders of English nationalism – and the coming of independence.'

<sup>47</sup> Delia and Armstrong, 'Sponsoring the #FrenchOpen: An Examination of Social Media Buzz and Sentiment.'

<sup>48</sup> Mendelsohn, 'Transforming the state, challenging the nation: the role of identity politics in the Brexit vote.'

<sup>49</sup> Coburn, 'Brexit unleashed an English nationalism that has damaged the union with Scotland for good'; Kenny, 'The English Question and Brexit'; Mackay, 'Brexit speaks of the death shudders of English nationalism – and the coming of independence.'

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<sup>50</sup> Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, 53.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>52</sup> Marlowe, 'Paris mayor thanks Irish fans for "songs" and "sportsmanship"'; O'Boyle and Kearns, 'The Greening of Euro 2016.'

<sup>53</sup> Kearney, 'More Catholics than Protestants for first time in Northern Ireland Census.'

<sup>54</sup> Mauro, 'Media discourse, sport and the nation,' 947.

<sup>55</sup> Skey, 'The Routine Flagging of Nationhood Across the Visual Environment,' 83.

<sup>56</sup> Abrams et al, 'Beyond Us and Them - Societal Cohesion in Britain Through Eighteen Months of COVID-19.'

<sup>57</sup> Clavane and Long, 'Bigger than ourselves: the Southgate narrative and the search for a sense of common purpose.'

<sup>58</sup> Lawrence and Crawford, 'Towards a Digital Football Studies,' 59.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*