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The Johnson Factor – British National Identity and Boris Johnson

Abstract

Research by writers such as Sobolweska and Ford shows us that identity matters in British politics. This article builds on previous research on both ethnocentric voting and studies of Boris Johnson's leadership to argue that Johnson, between entering the House of Commons in May 2015 and resigning as Foreign Secretary in July 2018, did not personally use language in his writing or speeches which appealed to ethnocentric voters. Instead, by analysing Johnson's representation in three right-of-centre newspapers, this article demonstrates that Johnson was linked to nationalistic and nostalgic language by two of those newspapers. Johnson was, between May 2015 and July 2018, the beneficiary of this link, allowing him to appeal to ethnocentric voters without having to use inflammatory or divisive language to make his appeal. *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* linked Johnson to an uncritical, nostalgic vision of Britain (or England) which appealed to certain groups of voters on both sides of the political divide. The article concludes that this link between patriotic or nostalgic imagery and Johnson has been politically useful and has aided his political journey to Downing Street. (183 words)

Introduction

Identity matters in British politics. This article argues that nostalgic, identity-ladened language has been utilised to appeal to ethnocentric voters and draw them towards the Conservative party, specifically encouraging them to support Boris Johnson. The specific question being answered here is whether Johnson, between becoming an MP in May 2015 and resigning as Foreign Secretary in July 2018, utilised that historic imagery highlighting Britain's past glories himself or whether that image was created for him by right-ring popular newspapers in the UK. Johnson has created an image of himself amongst the electorate of

being in touch with their issues and concerns while also having a traditional, almost classically -+Conservative background. Publicly, Johnson has made clear his views on Britain's contested history, the Black Lives Matter movement and the 'culture wars'. More than many other currently serving politicians, Johnson has been linked to nostalgic, rose-tinted images of Britain's past. He has defended an uncritical vision of Britain's past, something which appears to have been popular amongst the electorate. But where is this historic link coming from?

It is possible that *either* Johnson *or* right-wing newspapers have associated him with positive imagery surrounding the British Empire and the Second World War, or it could be a nuanced blend of both. This article will analyse the speeches, blogs and articles written by Johnson and three right-of-centre national newspapers – *The Sun, The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail* – to establish whether these publications have utilised language and imagery relating to Britain's 'glorious' Empire or wartime history in relation to Johnson specifically (not simply his policies) and why, if that is happening, that would be beneficial for Johnson.

Discourse analysis focusing on Johnson and the use of imagery from Britain's history has not been undertaken previously, and this article makes a unique and valuable contribution to the field of existing literature. Much of the literature on Johnson has focused on his personality and image (for example, Bower, 2020), impact on the Conservative party (for example, Hayton, 2022, 18-20) or his time as London Mayor (for example, Worthy, Bennister and Stafford, 2018, 23-43). While there have been discourse analysis studies of Johnson before, these have focused on other aspects of his language, such as his language in the House of Commons (Judge, 2022, 77-86). By studying Johnson's own writing alongside his media coverage, this article argues that Johnson was linked to Britain's 'glorious' history without

publicly contributing to it. This suited his purposes as a backbencher and then Foreign Secretary as he was able to reap the electoral benefits of this link while not having to directly contribute to it. However, when he resigned as Foreign Secretary, Johnson immediately adopted this historical rhetoric himself, building on what had already been done to foster his own public image. This unique conclusion, and unique approach, builds on pre-existing literature on Johnson, the Brexit campaign and those linked to it as well as adding to the developing field of literature on Johnson as well as the wider debate on Empire 2.0, public perceptions on Britain's legacy and the use of the 'culture wars' by politicians.

While some in the UK and overseas are re-evaluating Britain's Empire to create a more nuanced account of Britain's past, Johnson appears to be intrinsically linked to it. He has avoided comparisons or links with more modern-day leaders such as Thatcher, Major or May and instead has been linked to a more old-fashioned, rose-tinted image of Britain. Johnson has often spoken in glowing terms about the British Empire (which he reportedly argued should never have ended (Stone, 2020)) and, in less flattering terms, about the members of the Commonwealth (whom he described as 'flag-waving piccaninnies' with 'watermelon smiles' (Forrest, 2019)), a comment he later argued was taken out of context (Hansard, HC Deb, 14/07/21). Zimbabwean film maker Farai Sevenzo, writing for the BBC when Johnson was appointed Foreign Secretary in 2016, argued that Johnson had 'the whiff of a 1940s colonial district administrator' about him but 'his attitude is from an earlier century, full of the arrogance of empire and the condescension of the so-called "civilisers" (Sevenzo, BBC, 2016). While this imagery will not be popular with all voters, for those who feel that Britain (or more accurately, England, which is often conflated with Britain) and British-ness is under attack, this imagery has huge emotional appeal. But how has that link been forged and

maintained? Is the rhetorical imagery coming from Johnson's own words or is it being created for him by sections of the print media? Are the two elements working together?

While Johnson's rise to the political top might have been a little bumpier than he would have liked, he has managed to become Prime Minister, and won a majority at the 2019 election, despite condemnation of previous controversial comments he had made while a journalist, which would have sunk the careers of other politicians. While describing gay men as 'tank-topped bumboys' (Moore, no date) or Muslim women as choosing 'to go around looking like letter boxes' (Zatat, 2019) certainly disgusted some, for others, the comments were considerably less problematic, potentially reflecting their own views or an unwillingness to accept casual racism and homophobia as issues. Johnson's political success was, in no small part, due to his ability to read the British public and adopt a style and rhetoric which played into their wants. This enabled him to back the winning horse in policy terms – to attach himself to success and shrug off any failure or scandal which might taint his image. This was particularly evident in the 2016 EU referendum where Johnson painted himself as a "man of the people" who was in touch with the complaints of regular voters about the EU, some of which he had deliberately encouraged while a *Daily Telegraph* correspondent in Brussels. Despite a difficult tenure at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office between July 2016 and July 2018, his continued identity as a Brexiteer, and his eventual resignation from cabinet over Theresa May's withdrawal agreement, insulated him from the political obscurity the backbenches can hold for many.

Implicit in this article is the argument that identity matters. Johnson is undoubtedly a hugely influential figure, and the image he creates of Britain for his domestic audience is crucial to selling policy ideas, selling his political party and selling himself. As concerns are raised over

Britain's colonial past and former 'greatness' in the light of the Black Lives Matter campaigns, the Windrush scandal and the increasing questions on the legacy of slavery in the UK (and elsewhere) some voters will take refuge in the more traditional, overwhelming positive imagery of empire and British greatness which Johnson appears to embody. The media persona of Johnson – as an astute reader of 'the peoples will' but also a bumbling, foppish individual, proud to be British and eager to praise Britain's former glories in a time where reflection on the Empire has become rightly more critical - has played well in some sections of the electorate. Is Johnson's media persona one which he has publically helped to create or one which has been created for him by the press, undoubtedly with the willing acquiescence and support of his press team?

Identity and the Media

Writing in 2004, John Street analysed the phenomenon of the celebrity politician, a label which could easily be attached to Johnson. Street investigated whether the rise of the celebrity politician (that is, a politician who attempts to court celebrity, rather than a celebrity who becomes a politician, which he dealt with later in the same article) was damaging for democracy.

> When conventional politicians adopt the guise of the celebrity, when they pose as rock stars, do they appeal to images and identities that have no place in representative democratic politics, or are they establishing the very connections (between represented and representative) upon which "representation" depends? (Street, 2004, 436).

As a former journalist, it could be argued that Johnson is both a politician who became a celebrity and a quasi-celebrity who became a politician. What is important to note about Johnson is that his image is unlikely to be accidental. It is undoubtedly adopted with great care and is the result of a long career in journalism, before he entered front-line politics in 2001. While he can appear to be bumbling and harmlessly hapless, his frequent pointed insults, aimed at specific sectors of society, speak directly to a specific section of the voting public, suggesting design not accident. Suggesting that insults are satire or just for comic effect is a technique used by many to say insulting and damaging things to specific communities without having to face any meaningful criticism and ensuring deniability (Laura Bates discusses how this technique is utilised by certain types of incels and misogynists in her 2020 publication *Men Who Hate Women*). Interestingly, Johnson rarely, if ever, apologies for his comments in the press, suggesting that he is not distancing himself from them. The popularity, political position and gravitas of a politician can often be the decisive factor in whether their argument and stance is accepted, rather than their political knowledge or experience. Never has this been more true than in relation to Boris Johnson.

The print media has a vested interest in creating a specific image of Boris Johnson. For the pro-Brexit newspapers, Johnson became their poster boy; a publicly educated MP who appeared to be both educated and upper-class but in touch with ordinary voters. As Alice Foster, writing for the *Daily Express* (30/06/16) pointed out 'The former London Mayor was the figurehead of the Brexit battle and is thought to have widespread popular support. Despite being an old Etonian, the MP is seen to have the common touch thanks to his genial manner and sense of humour.' For the pro-Remain press, Johnson became a figure of fun, a representative of all that was worst about the old boys networks and the benefits of social privilege in British politics. As argued by William Wallace, Liberal Democrat Lord, in *The*

Independent (12/04/17) 'Boris remains popular with the Conservative grassroots. It will take time for his incompetence, now evident to both friendly and unfriendly foreign governments, to become clear to the domestic audience.' *The Daily Telegraph*, who employed Johnson as a journalist for a number of years, suggested in an opinion piece published on 27th April 2017, that his appeal was due to his entertaining character. It argued that 'voters tire of hearing the same message repeated over and over again; or they simply stop listening. By contrast, they warm to the authenticity that Boris exhibits – slightly dishevelled, impromptu and rarely protected by teams of minders and activists (*Daily Telegraph,* 27/04/17). This suggests that the key to Johnson's success is the style, not the substance.

During his campaign for the Conservative Party leadership in 2019, *The Daily Telegraph* supported Johnson wholeheartedly. Even during the leadership campaign, when his policies came under more scrutiny than they had previously, it was Johnson's character that was key and criticisms of his political mistakes or vague policy ideas were often ignored on that basis. His reputation was crucial to selling his political position. Additionally, the success of the Brexit campaign, and the Conservative party, are and were dependent on the success of the Johnson brand. This intertwining of Brexit and Johnson appears to have benefitted Johnson personally and allowed him to tap into some of the more nationalistic right-wing rhetoric which surrounded the Leave campaign in the national press.

Identity politics has arguably never been more debated in the UK than it currently is. Brexit has, depending on your viewpoint, either created division within the British population or has instead brought to the surface pre-existing divisions within society with long roots. Individuals, including Johnson, have positioned themselves (or have been positioned by the media) on one side in the 'culture wars', fighting 'woke-ism' with their more traditional

right-wing views. The differing attitudes of the politicians and the public during the Brexit campaign are an excellent example of the lack of consensus over Britain's global identity and future. Hansen (2006) argued that 'the relationship between identity and foreign policy is at the center of poststructuralism's research agenda: foreign policies rely upon representations of identity, but it is also through the formulation of foreign policy that identities are produced and reproduced' (2006, 1). Foreign policy, in common with many domestic policies, is often interpreted through identities – what do the left and right want? What to extremists or moderates prefer? These identities are key, as are the people who create them. The more powerful the advocate, the more potent the imagery created and its longevity in the minds of the public.

Brexit, Populism and Empire 2.0

There has been considerable academic writing on Britain's identity and its past. This writing has been encouraged by Brexit, the 'War on woke' and the Culture Wars (real or imagined). Without EU membership, what would the UK look like? What policies and policy aims would the country pursue? Chris Grey suggests that Brexit, and the campaign which surrounded it, is better understood 'through the complex and paradoxical politics of populism' (2021, 255). Grey notes that Brexit was characterised as a fight against 'the political elite', a 'them and us' mentality (256-257). The contradiction in this of individuals such as Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg and Nigel Farage portraying themselves, or perhaps more importantly for this article, being portrayed by others as anything other than the political elite was, according to Grey, 'plainly ludicrous' (256). Grey goes further, arguing that those supporting Brexit often did so based on cultural identity. It was not simply about Britain's membership of the EU, it was about 'freedom to "talk about immigration", freedom to

celebrate Christmas not "Winterval", freedom to fly the St. George's flag or the Union Jack without being sneered at' (257). For those voters who were convinced that their 'Britishness' was under attack, Brexit provided them with a perfect opportunity to not only demonstrate their unhappiness, but also an opportunity to reclaim their more traditional, more old-fashioned image of Britain, or perhaps more accurately, England.

In Sobolewska and Ford's pivotal text 'Brexitland', they make a similar argument to Grey on in-and-out groups. They argue that

> across a range of issues, including immigration, equal opportunities, views of the EU and views of devolution and constitutional reform, ethnocentric voters [those who divide the world into groups (3)] consistently favour stances which protect or enhance the position of their in-group, while opposing policies which protect or enhance the position of the out-groups (2020, 62).

Within their writing, Sobolewska and Ford argue that ethnocentric voters (those who divide the world into different groups or focus on identity within their politics) are not a produce of Brexit but that the referendum allowed them an opportunity to express their views in a more visible way than general elections allowed (4). They highlight the importance of identity politics within not simply the Brexit referendum, but the 2017 and 2019 general elections (286-311) and how that has impacted on the prospects of both Labour and the Conservatives. While both Grey and Sobolewska and Ford (amongst others) have written very compelling accounts of the key role of ethnocentric or identity-focused voters in understanding the 2016 referendum result, others have also highlighted the importance of identity within wider voting

patterns. Writing in 2016, Jennings and Stoker argued that there were crucial differences between cosmopolitan areas and those they label ‘backwaters’.

> In cosmopolitan areas we find an England that is global in outlook; relatively positive about the EU; pro-immigration; comfortable with more rights and respect for women, ethnic communities and gays and lesbians; and generally future-orientated. In backwaters we observe instead an England that is inward-looking, relatively negative about the EU and immigration, worried by the emergence of the new rights for ‘minorities’ and prone to embracing nostalgia (2016, 372).

Continuing their work in 2017, Jennings and Stoker argued that the Conservative campaign in the general election of that year had given a general sense of ‘turning the clocks back’, offering voters a more old-fashioned Britain in return for their vote (2017, 368). Writing in 2020, Roberts Sanders wrote of the ‘myth of imperial nostalgia’ and how it had been weaved into the 2016 referendum campaign.

> In the years around the Brexit vote, figures such as Boris Johnson, Liam Fox and Jacob Rees-Mogg constructed visions of British history that actively minimised the significance of empire, establishing a heroic vision of the past that was *global* rather than *imperial*. The story they told was not of a great empire than no longer existed – required to cut its cloth differently for a post-colonial age – but of a small island that had always punched above its weight: a ‘swashbuckling’, ‘buccaneering’ people, winning out against the odds (Sanders, 2020, 1144)

Michael Kenny argued that this return to more 'traditional' image of a nation were not confined to the UK but were also noticeable within Trump's 'Make America Great Again' campaign in 2016 (2017, 257). This return to a more nostalgic view of Britain (or perhaps more accurately, a conflation of England with Britain) appeals to a specific group of voters on both the left and right, and the use of this imagery by a politician, or on their behalf, could easily increase their chances of success, something which Johnson has benefited from. By wrapping himself in this imagery, or allowing others to wrap it around him, he and his party have broken the red wall in the North of England and allowed even left-wing Brexit-supporters to find a home in the Conservative party. YouGov reported that of Leave voters 50% thought the British Empire was something to be proud of rather than ashamed of (20% for Remain voters), 51% believed that the colonised nations were better for the experience of colonisation (22% for Remain voters) and 39% would still like Britain to have an Empire (16% for Remain voter) (Smith, YouGov, 11/03/2020).

Johnson and the Brexit Campaign

Johnson's views on the EU before the Brexit campaign are confusing, something Channel 4 drew attention to in 2019 (Worrall). While he had undoubtedly written very critically about the EU, particularly while at the *Daily Telegraph*, it was expected that Johnson was likely to back the pro-EU campaign. For example, Cockerell suggested that Johnson held unenthusiastic but largely pro-EU views, as expressed in his previous careers as journalist and London Mayor (*Guardian*, 22/06/16). His decision to join 'Vote Leave' campaign highlights Johnson's ability to predict the political weather. The expectation prior to the referendum campaign was that the supporters of Britain remaining in the EU would be

victorious, and therefore for an ambitious MP such as Johnson, supporting the 'Vote Leave' campaign seemed like political suicide. Indeed, David Cameron argued that 'while Boris cared about this issue, it was secondary to another concern: what was the best outcome for him?' (Cameron, 2019, 654).

It is possible that Johnson's opposition to the EU was stronger than perhaps anyone had realised. If that was the case, there is little evidence to suggest it, as Johnson, prior to the referendum campaign, had appeared to be supportive if unenthusiastic of the UK remaining in the EU (Cockerell, *Guardian*, 22/06/16; Cameron, 2019, 652). Alternatively, it could be that Johnson recognised the likelihood of the leave vote being successful, and the potential boost that would be for his own political career, perhaps even propelling him into Downing Street, and therefore decided to follow the potential victory.

The Brexit supporters were able to rely on historically tried and tested notions of "Britishness" to define themselves and their arguments, without resorting to detailed policy breakdown. The focus on identity rather than policy detail was both compelling and uniting. The referendum 'made voters acutely aware of new identity divisions and helped to forge new partisan identities rooted in these divisions … These divisions may continue to exert a disruptive influence for many years to come' (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, 3). Writing in 2019, Oliver Daddow analysed the May government's 'Global Britain' brand, a repackaging which Johnson, as a leading Brexiteer and Foreign Secretary, was at the heart of. The narrative surrounding 'Global Britain' was an attempt by the May government to emulate the success of the Brexit campaign in 'selling' a British identity. The 'Global Britain' brand explain what a post-Brexit Britain would look like, to both a domestic and international audience in vague, but positive, terms. Using discourse analysis Daddow argued that the term

‘Global Britain’ contained two staple ingredients of a nation’s world role conception. Firstly, the term ‘extended the “pragmatic” tradition in British foreign policy, themes around the dogged pursuit of vital British economic and security interests through the exercise of its hard and soft power capabilities’ (Daddow, 2019, 15). Secondly, the term ‘recognized the continuity of grand strategy, occasionally requiring tactical recalibration’ (Daddow, 2019, 16). Vague terms were used deliberately, as the brand, and those selling it, were never clear on what exactly the good and bad were and in what policy areas they applied.

As an astute interpreter of political opinion, Johnson has not simply reflected the wider political views of certain sections of the electorate in the UK, he has also acted as a lightning rod for such views, as demonstrated by his role in the Brexit campaign and previously as Mayor of London. In these roles, Johnson was able to effectively mould his own attitudes and viewpoints to speak to the concerns of the electorate. During the Brexit campaign he made similar arguments to other ‘leave’ supporters, such as Farage, but used a different style and often different interpretations more fitting with this personal position and reputation. By focusing on discourse and analyzing the language which Johnson uses, it allows us to examine Johnson’s views over time, revealing his personal opinions on the role and status of Britain in the global political arena. By then comparing that to the language used by leading right of centre newspapers, it will become evident whether Johnson’s public image is being self-created or generated by the print media.

Research Methodology

Discourse analysis is a widely used method for analysing both written and verbal contributions to debate and discussion. While there are certainly good practices within

discourse analysis, there is 'no grand agreed-upon body of content for discourse analysis. There are too many approaches and controversies for that' (Gee, 2010, x). While different types of communication often require different levels of evidence gathering and different approaches to analysis, for the analysis of newspaper articles there is no shortage of material to be analysed. This form of discourse analysis is labelled 'corpus' analysis, where a large body of material is collected and often analysed by computer programme to reduce the impact of the researchers' implicit bias. Cameron and Panovic note that

> the use of corpus methods adds a *quantitative* dimension to discourse analysis, using statistical techniques to identity patterns in the data being analysed. That is to say the approach is purely quantitative: qualitative analysis is also needed to interpret the patterns and explain their significance (2014, 81).

This combination of both quantitative and qualitative analysis has been used in this study.

Corpus analysis, as with all analytical approaches, has shortcomings. The focus on language can disregard visual cues and body language, features which are often utilized by politicians (such as Wilson's use of a pipe in public, Churchill's cigar or Thatcher's handbag and dress style). For a politician like Johnson, his visual appearance is a key part of his electoral appeal. Janes wrote of Johnson's hair as a 'political device'. 'A quick ruffle when the cameras are on allows Johnson to assume the role of a casual "man of the people", especially when the look is completed with a rumpled suit and a barely-tucked-in shirt' (2021). While discourse analysis cannot measure the effectiveness of political devices such as an untucked shirt or perhaps even more pronounced physical characteristics such as the height of a politician, the use of their hands or their facial expressions, it can provide an insight into their persona. The

image that an individual creates is not simply created by their appearance or the word they say or write. It is often made up of many different aspects of their character, but it would be unusual for that character not to be evident in their language – for their image to be contradictory to their words. While the author accepts that corpus analysis of textual sources is not without these potential shortcomings, it does offer us another tool when analysing individuals.

Part of the link between Johnson and Britain's historic past is based upon his authorship of a biography of Winston Churchill, published in 2014. In this book, Johnson often compares himself to Churchill. 'I am not a professional historian, and as a politician I am not worthy to loose the latchet on his shoes…' (Johnson, 2015, 4). However, Johnson makes it clear that he has been inspired by the former Conservative Prime Minister and, while being dismissive of his own comparative strengths in print, the linkages are there for all to see. 'For those of us who have tried feebly to do just some of the things he did, it can be a bit crushing.' (Johnson, 2015, 350). Irrespective of his words, Johnson's biography, and his style of writing about Churchill and the comparisons with his own life and upbringing, make linkages between the two men very straightforward, if misleading. However, Johnson is not the only politician to have written a biography of another, but the association between the two figures is not often made (for example, William Hague's biography of William Pitt the Younger or Roy Jenkins' biography of Disraeli).

The context of language, both verbal and written, can be crucial and computer-based textual discourse analysis can overlook this context, changing the implied meaning of specific terms or sentences. While qualitative analysis of selected text or verbal interactions can attempt to

reduce that lack of context, it often cannot be done with large data sets. Todd points out that it is 'important to analyse discourse over time, examining discursive changes and continuities' (2016, 13). This study focused on a short time period (3 years) to analyze any shifts in discourse. In total, 92 pieces of material written by Johnson were analyzed. Approximately 20% of the sources analyzed were articles which Johnson had written and were published in UK newspapers. These covered a period from 7th May 2015 to 9th July 2018 (the duration of Johnson's time in the House of Commons until his resignation as Foreign Secretary) and were either accessed via the website archive of the relevant newspapers or via the BorisJohnson.com website which contains links to the work of Johnson across numerous media outlets. Additionally, speeches (approximately 30% of the material) and blog entries (approximately 30% of the material) by Johnson were included in the study, collected via the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website or Boris Johnson's official Facebook page. Additionally, articles and speeches were collected via the official VoteLeave website, which contains links to speeches and material issued by prominent Brexit MPs during the EU referendum campaign, including Johnson. There has been no preference shown in terms of the content of the speeches, to ensure that there was as little bias as possible in the source collection process. Additionally included within the dataset were relevant Facebook entries, press releases and letters.

Certain forms of evidence were excluded from the data set. Press releases from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which were often released in Johnson's name, were excluded for two reasons. Firstly, press releases tended to be short, and therefore the data which could be extrapolated from them would be very partial. Secondly, the fact that a press release has been issued in the name of Johnson does not necessarily mean he had any input into it, and it could easily be misleading in our interpretation of Johnson's views, confusing the official line of

the FCO with Johnson's personal views. Another form of material which was not included were letters released during the Brexit campaign which were signed by Johnson (as one of several signatories) but were not written or delivered by him. To put your name to a letter simply indicates that you are supportive of the general aims of the letter, not that you specifically agree with the reasoning or argument in the letter, and therefore these were excluded. Any letters written by Johnson alone were included. One final issue was newspaper paywalls, which made the collection of material a little more difficult. However, Johnson often copied full text versions of his newspaper articles on his Facebook page, or these were available via other websites shadowing his work, which meant this was an easily solved issue.

While some of Johnson's articles were reproduced on Facebook and were directly sourced from there, his wider social media presence has not been utilized. This is for several reasons. Firstly, during the period covered by this article, his presence on Facebook and Twitter appears to have reinforced his print output, so it could be considered a confirmation of his rhetoric and views rather than a new source of information. Secondly, social media is an enclosed 'bubble' of individuals. For those individuals, often young and technologically savvy, Twitter and Facebook are an instant source of news and opinion, allowing them to engage with politicians. However, for many voters, Twitter and Facebook are either not used for political purposes or are not used at all. Cybercrew estimate that twitter has approximately 19 million users in the UK, but that could be of any age (with Twitter having a minimum age of 13) (Struger, 2022). The ONS notes that there are 49, 906, 270 registered voters in the UK at a similar period (ONS). Twitter (and other platforms such as Facebook) can make an electoral difference but there is little evidence that Johnson or his supporters were using the platforms available for this or that the messages they were distributing were different to those

in print newspapers. As a former journalist, it is reasonable to focus on this form of discourse initially, although social media may make an interesting later study.

Research Findings

The analysis software used was NVivo 10. The software analysed the speeches and articles authored and delivered by Boris Johnson. As Johnson is often linked to an image of Britain's glorious (and often militaristic) history, the expectation was that certain key terms would be repeatedly present in his discourse. The terms would relate to the stature of the United Kingdom and would be very similar to those found in the wider Brexit campaign, harking back to Britain's imperial and wartime past, such as the British bulldog or references to the British Empire or the Second World War. Additionally, it was expected that there would be extensive use of words which would indicate weakness in those opposing Brexit, again linked to wartime rhetoric, such as perhaps 'traitor', 'weak' or even 'collaborator'.

These stereotypical images of bravery and cowardice are often utilised within the press, and politicians often use them as a form of shorthand to explain their views or reinforce their arguments. As Johnson is often part of this rhetoric, being both a leading Brexiteer and a keen fan of Churchill, it was expected that he too would utilise this language to speak about his policy aims and objectives in a way which would be reproduced by the print media and be easily understood the electorate. Non-political terms were removed from the analysis although some terms could be utilised in different ways so were kept in for completeness (e.g. people).

The results showed that Johnson's speeches and articles made **no** reference to any of the expected terms, or any stereotypical terms associated with Great Britain. The most recurring political terms were (including the number of recurrences within the material):

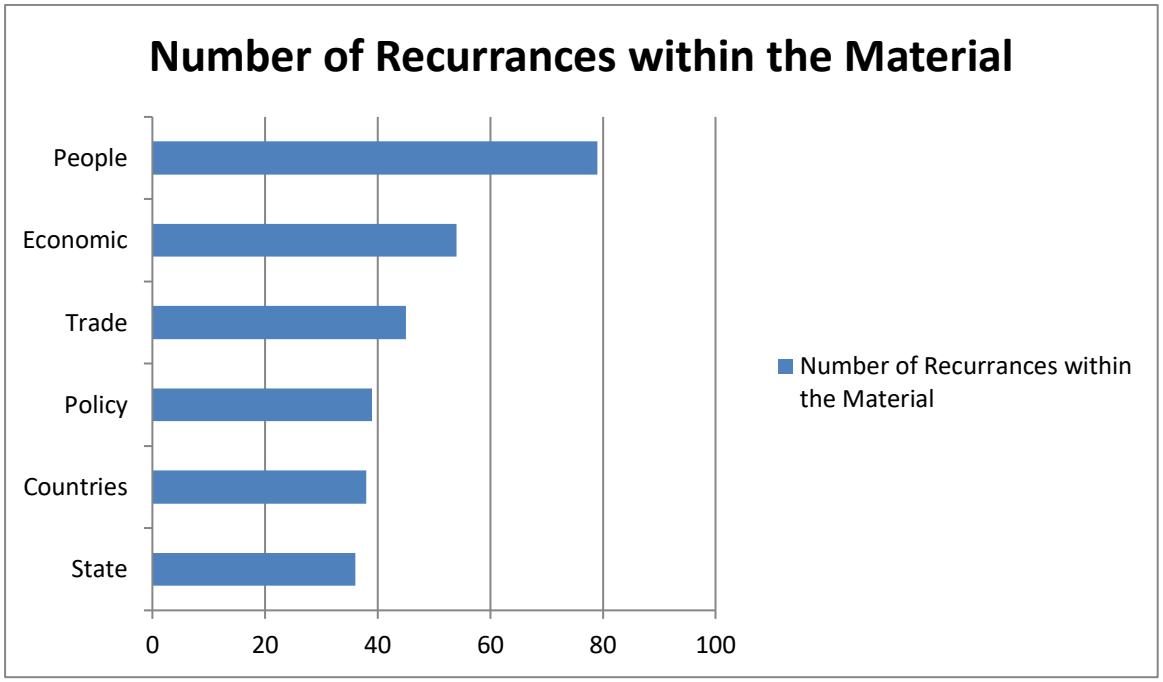

Figure One – The highest-ranking words evident within Johnson's collected work over the period 07/05/15 to 09/07/18.

As can be seen, none of these terms directly relate to Britain's international identity. All these words could be easily dismissed as 'bread-and-butter' terms for an MP. In fact, in all the material collected which was authored by Johnson, only one piece, a 2013 speech at the Margaret Thatcher lecture, makes direct reference to Britain's international identity. In that speech Johnson argued that Britain might not be a world power but was 'a first rank even as a European one' (Johnson, 2013). These terms suggest that while the imagery of Britain's wartime past **was** being utilised in the run-up to Britain's initial leaving date from the EU on 29th March 2019, it was not being utilised by Johnson himself publicly.

If Johnson, both as a cabinet minister and before that a backbench MP, was not utilising specific language in speeches and articles to link to Britain's historic past, why does he have a reputation as an MP who speaks to those who yearn for a more nostalgic version of Britain, to 'take back control'? Is this dissonance being driven by the media and its perception of Johnson?

It is possible that one newspaper might be driving the narrative or at least publicising the narrative which already exists, creating a strong linkage between Johnson and a specific image of Britain and that this imagery is crowding out other voices and images. In order to test this, the author analysed the language used in articles published by *The Sun* newspaper in England which included mention of Boris Johnson in the headline. The headline was focused on as Johnson was often mentioned in articles which had very little to do with his personal policies or position, and therefore to have included all the articles which mentioned his name would have created very misleading results. *The Sun* (England) is Britain's most popular daily newspaper, with a daily average readership of 1.45 million copies (statista.com). It is also a tabloid paper, meaning that it is more likely to use short-hand comments or literary imagery to create a perception of individuals than broadsheet newspapers. This is something which *The Sun* has done very effectively in the past. For example, the cartoon of Neil Kinnock's head in a light bulb accompanying the headline 'If Kinnock wins today will the last person in Britain please turn out the lights' or its labelling of the Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown as 'Paddy Pantsdown' after his extra-marital affair became front page news (Moore, *The Sun*, 2019). If this perceived imagery of Johnson as being linked to historic victories and moments of international pride were to be evident in any UK newspaper, it would be likely to be evident in *The Sun*, even if it had originated in another publication. If the imagery were evident in *The Sun,* further discourse analysis of right-wing newspapers

could be undertaken to determine if it was only *The Sun* which was engaging in this imagery of it was indicative of a wider trend. For the purposes of this content analysis, articles from *The Sun* (Scotland) edition were removed due to Scotland not being so attached to traditional English stereotypes or images. Appealing to the readership of *The Sun* (Scotland) by focusing on a very English image, such as the British bulldog spirit, would be unlikely to have such resonance north of the border.

The Sun published 526 articles, between 7th May 2015 and 9th July 2018, which specifically mentioned Johnson in the headline. After excluding all duplication of content (due to articles being published in different editions of the same newspaper), this left 417 articles, which were analysed in an identical way to the wider field. As with the wider literature analysis, the most recurring terms were (including the number of recurrences within the material):

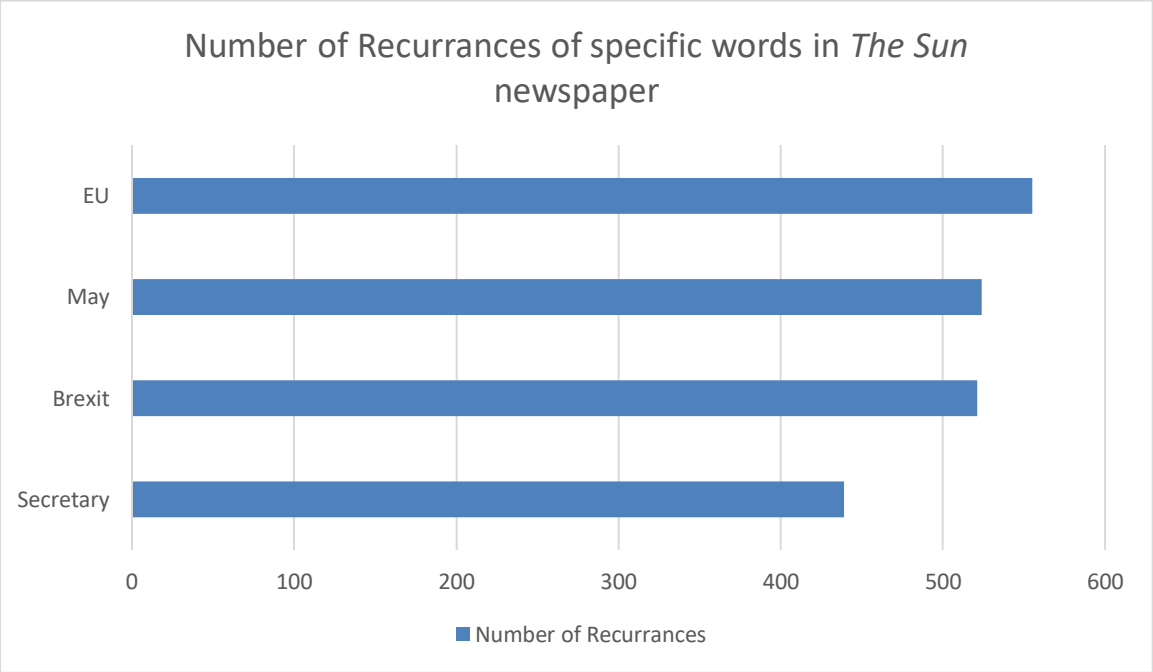

Figure Two - The highest-ranking words evident within articles naming Boris Johnson in *The Sun* Newspaper over the period 07/05/15 to 09/07/18 (with the exclusion of more general terms)

None of these terms were surprising, or suggested any specific imagery was being used by *The Sun*. What they do show is Johnson's singular focus on Brexit. This may be unsurprising, but it does confirm his centrality to and preoccupation with the Brexit debate.

If we look at the lower end of the recurrence tables, we do see some interesting terms, which, while not necessarily statistically significant, do warrant further investigation:

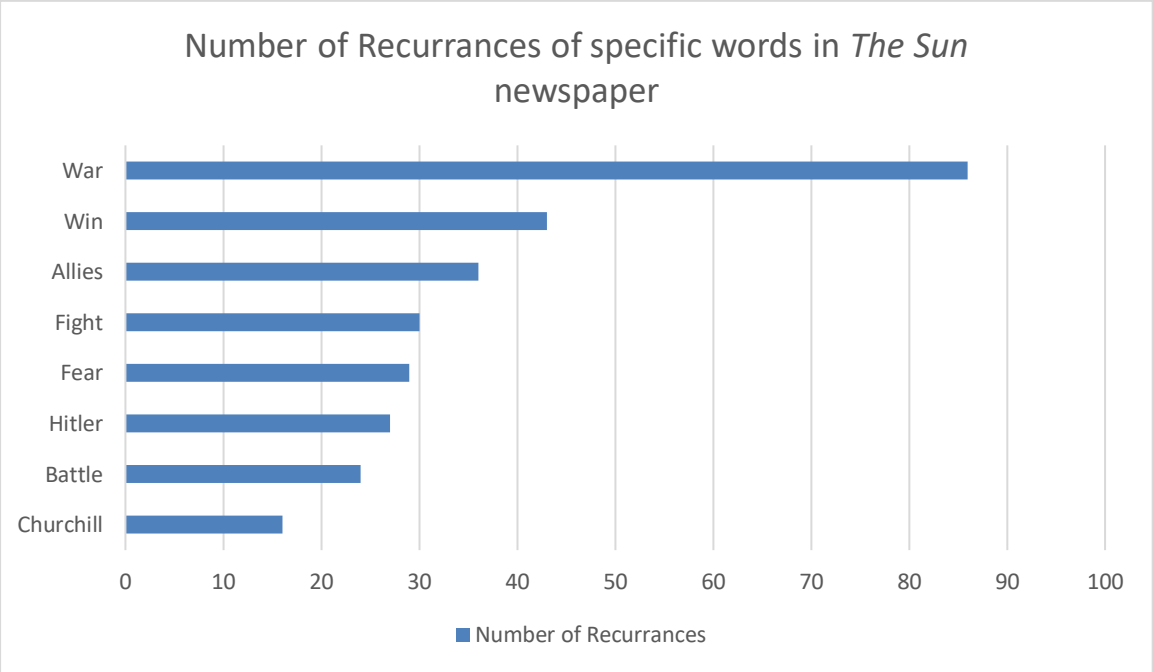

Figure Three – The number of recurrent uses of specific terms evident within articles naming Boris Johnson in *The Sun* Newspaper over the period 07/05/15 to 09/07/18

While some of these terms might easily be used when discussing negotiations, particularly difficult negotiations (such as fight, win and war), other terms such as Churchill, Hitler and fear are somewhat more unusual. This prompted further qualitative analysis to establish when these terms had been used and in what context.

Qualitative Analysis of *The Sun* newspaper

When qualitatively analysing the articles in *The Sun* newspaper from this period, what becomes clear is that a narrative of patriotism and historic dominance is clearly evident in their reporting. By using specific words or phrases within a wider report, the newspaper creates a specific binary image of Britain (the innocent valiant nation), its relationship with the EU (bureaucrats, deliberately undermining the UK) and the Brexit negotiations (right vs. wrong). For example, after Johnson referred to the EU as having ambitions akin to those of Hitler in May 2016, *The Sun* ran seven articles which referenced this incident (dated 16/05/16 (two articles), 18/05/16, 19/05/16, 20/05/16, 22/05/16 and 30/07/16). This continual low-level reinforcement of and defence of Johnson's comment is combined with a constant narrative within the newspaper of Britain's position as a strong global nation, and the EU as an 'interference' (Lamont, *The Sun,* 26th June 2016). Specific references are made to Hitler, Churchill and Britain's 'finest hour' (for example, Kavanagh, *The Sun,* 20th July 2015, which references all three terms), all of which allude to Britain's victorious and noble actions during the Second World War, drawing attention to the separation between Britain (the victorious and virtuous winners of the Second World War) and continental Europe (the losers and the defeated).

The zenith point of this reporting was in an article published on the day of the EU referendum (Hawkes, Davidson, Cole, *The Sun,* 23rd June 2016). This article entitled 'Let the Lion Roar; Independence Day: Future in your Hands, Cry Freedom for the Best of Britain' includes a number of familiar terms and imagery. The article, which quoted Johnson extensively, advised readers to 'let the lion roar again', obviously referencing the lion as a symbol of British dominance, suggesting that Britain had been subjugated for some time, and was now able to achieve its freedom by exercising its strength. The article continued, quoting Johnson as saying that it was time to '"cry freedom" by BeLeaving in Britannia - and throwing off the

shackles of the European Union.' This was followed by a call to make 23rd June 2016 'Independence Day'. Later in the same article, a speech by Johnson was referred to as a 'passionate Churchillian-style plea' with Johnson branding the referendum 'a battle for British democracy'.

An interesting feature of the coverage by *The Sun* is that all these articles were published across the whole period under analysis, in 2015, 2016 and 2017. In clearer terms, these articles all link Johnson directly to specific imagery of Britain while the EU referendum was taking place, and then while he was competing for the leadership of the party and later as Foreign Secretary. This is not something which is numerically significant in the quantitative research but is very clear in the qualitative research and raises further questions.

Qualitative Analysis of the Wider Right-Wing Media

To establish if the approach being taken by *The Sun* in its coverage is different to the approach being taken by other newspapers, The *Sun* content was compared with other right-wing newspapers. The qualitative research focused on pro-Brexit and pro-Conservative newspapers, as the expectation would be that linking Brexit and its supporters to the bulldog spirit of the war years would be done primarily by those publications looking to support Johnson, Brexit and the Conservative Party. This stage of analysis was focused on articles published in the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*, both pro-Tory, pro-Brexit newspapers, during the period 7th May 2015 to 9th July 2018, to mirror the quantitative research parameters.

During this period, *The Daily Telegraph* published 74 articles which specifically mentioned Boris Johnson by name (the total number of articles was 84, but of these, ten were duplications). The purpose of this qualitative analysis was to identify any terms, phrases or comments which might create in the reader a perception of Britain and its global status. For example, James Crisp, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* on 12th July 2017 discussed how Johnson had claimed that 'Brussels could "go whistle" if it expected large sums from Britain as part of its withdrawal agreement' (Crisp, *Daily Telegraph*, 12/07/17). This single statement would not perhaps be significant in a discourse analysis focusing on the frequency of specific terms, but it certainly has significance. Johnson's phrasing suggests a power dynamic, with the EU demanding or asking for money, while the UK, as the dominant partner in the relationship, is able to vigorously reject such a request with no concern over repercussions. While it does not reference a specific imagery of Britain, it presents an image which suggests a certain power dynamic, weighted very heavily in the favour of the UK. The purpose of the qualitative analysis was to identify these phrases, to ensure an extensive analysis of the period, supplementing the quantitative research.

Another issue which the qualitative analysis highlighted were the one-off comments made by Johnson, which again would not be a significant factor in a quantitative analysis, but are significant in terms of content and tone, illuminating Johnson's thoughts and personal beliefs. An example of this would be from Laura Hughes on 18th July 2016, reporting that Johnson had 'likened the EU to the ambitions of Hitler' (Hughes, *Daily Telegraph*, 18/07/16). This specific comment, which Hughes argues was a cause of 'great offence' was not a comment which Johnson made in print more than once, but it certainly paints quite a vivid picture of Johnson's views on the EU, and conversely his attitude towards Britain. It was also so evocative that it was referenced by others, such as Hughes, meaning Johnson did not need to

refer to it again for it to have impact. If the EU are the modern-day Nazi's (using wartime terms and associations for better effect), then Britain would again be the beacon of freedom, the enemy of totalitarianism and good in the fight against evil tyranny. By using this imagery, even if it is only occasionally, Johnson is creating a narrative of Britain which is at odds with his official comment, both during his tenure as Foreign Secretary (in his speeches or articles) or his own authored articles, produced while a backbencher, where these types of references and comments are considerably less noticeable.

It is important to note the linkages between Johnson and the *Daily Telegraph*. While the *Telegraph* is undoubtedly a key representative of the right-wing, pro-Conservative broadsheets in the UK, it also happens to have been Johnson's employer. According to *The Telegraph's* own website, Johnson began working for them as EU correspondent and was later Assistant Editor. After leaving his role as Foreign Secretary in 2018, he again began writing for *The Daily Telegraph* (www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/boris-johnson/). Therefore, it seems likely that, given this close professional relationship, *The Telegraph* would be particularly responsive to reporting Johnson in a manner which would be agreeable to him, causing as few public image problems as possible. This would suggest that, if linkages between Johnson and historic imagery were found, Johnson would have approved of such linkages rather than them being adopted by the newspaper against his wishes. Conversely, were these linkages to be absent, it would suggest that either Johnson was not making such linkages in his statements to *The Telegraph* or he was deliberately discouraging the newspaper from making such linkages in their reporting, something he was unable or unwilling to do at *The Sun.*

In all 74 articles across the period, the *Daily Telegraph* did not refer to Johnson using any specific wartime images, or describe any specific image of Britain in the Brexit negotiations which would allude to Britain's relative global position or image (excluding the specific terms which Johnson's himself used, as mentioned above). There could be several reasons for this. It could be that there was simply no need to overtly extol Britain's international standing, as the average *Telegraph* reader would naturally assume that Britain was a dominant global force without this being spelt out. Perhaps the *Daily Telegraph* was extremely circumspect with its reporting. Perhaps the use of imagery to depict the UK in the Brexit negotiations was simply not necessary as the story being told explained the negotiating dynamics to the reader without the use of suggestive literary imagery. It is likely that the cause was a combination of all three factors, but whatever the reasoning, the *Daily Telegraph* did not, during the period, refer specifically to Johnson alongside any imperial or wartime imagery or use any specific language which would depict Britain as globally dominant. This indicates that the imagery associated with Britain as a dominant global nation, utilizing wartime and empire imagery, was not driven during the period May 2015 to July 2018 by Johnson. Because of the linkages between the newspaper and Johnson, it seems likely that *The Daily Telegraph* have been, to a large extent, informed in their coverage by Johnson and his views, and their coverage reflects his official position.

Across the time period, the *Daily* Mail published 244 articles which mentioned Johnson in the headline. However, upon analysis, there was considerable duplication due to the different platforms on which these articles appeared (print, UK website, overseas websites etc.). There was also a tendency for Johnson to be mentioned within a story which had very little specifically to do with him, and therefore the number of articles finally analysed was slightly under 100. The qualitative analysis of these articles identified a key difference between the

article content in the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*. While the imagery of Britain's colonial and wartime past was very minimal within the *Daily Telegraph,* it was far more evident in the *Daily Mail*, with numerous examples of specific language being used to suggest wartime linkages or images to the reader. On 27th July 2018, the paper published an article entitled 'Austrian Chancellor insists the EU must find a way to avoid a hard Brexit as he meets Theresa May during her diplomatic blitz to save Chequers deal' (Sculthorpe, *Mail Online,* 27/07/18). The use of the word 'blitz' might be coincidental, but in the same article Steven Baker MP was quoted as saying 'On this road, eventually we will reach a fork between final capitulation or exit with no agreement' – again note the use of the word 'capitulation'. These words, although potentially insignificant as singular occurrences, create a gradual narrative of war and surrender, of a dynamic between the UK and the EU where both sides are in battle with each other, and one will be victorious.

This article, while not specifically about Johnson, included him within the article linking him with this rhetoric. In an article by Jack Doyle, discussing Johnson's resignation as Foreign Secretary, published on 9th July 2018, it refers to Downing Street 'spiking his [Johnson's] guns' and of May 'running up the white flag to Brussels', again referencing the imagery of war and surrender (Doyle, *Mail Online*, 09/07/18). Indeed, on 30th June 2018, Walters, Owen and Carlin wrote an article arguing that the fallout from the Brexit negotiations was akin to a game of Fortnite, with 'resignations, barbs, obscenities, slapdowns and threats', replacing the' crossbows, rifles and grenade launchers' of the game. On 28th May 2018, Kate Ferguson made a direct linkage to the Second World War, quoting Tom Tugendhat MP 'the success or failure of our foreign policy is now more important to the future health and prosperity of our nation than it has been at any time since the end of the Second World War' (Ferguson, *Mail Online*, 28/05/18). What should be noted about these comments, is that they date from 2018,

suggesting that the use of historical imagery by *The Daily Mail* began as the deadline for Britain leaving the EU on 29th March 2019 began to approach. Indeed, prior to 2018, the only notable discussion of the Second World War or colonialism in *The Daily Mail* in conjunction with Johnson was during the 2016 referendum campaign, in direct response to comments made by David Cameron regarding Winston Churchill (Tapsfield and Dathan, 10th May 2016).

Several conclusions can be drawn from this. Firstly, while the *Daily Mail* is using more obvious language to paint a picture of Britain at war, which might be expected from a tabloid newspaper rather than a broadsheet such as the *Telegraph*, the use of this language increased substantially from the beginning of 2018. It seems likely that this is due to the approaching deadline for Britain to leave the EU, and the inevitably difficult negotiations reaching their zenith point. Secondly, the use of this language is not coming directly or officially, during this period, from Johnson himself. Instead, the language is being used by journalists to present an image of Britain to accompany stories on Johnson, or stories in which Johnson is being included for journalistic benefit. Therefore, the qualitative analysis suggests that for the period that Johnson was a backbench MP and later Foreign Secretary, he did not publicly use language with wartime or historic connotations to create linkages between Brexit and Britain's historical past (other than a few notable exceptions, which are mentioned above). That is not to say that he did not support those who did, that he did not stand on platforms with those who made such linkages, or did not make those linkages himself in conversation or in off-the-record briefings. Simply put, during the time period May 2015 to July 2018, in print and in Johnson's formal speeches, these linkages were not evident, allowing him deniability.

Interestingly, in his first speech after resigning as Foreign Secretary, Johnson used a wide variety of evocative language when discussing Brexit, as reported in the *Daily Telegraph*. He spoke of rediscovering '"the spirit of dynamism' of the Victorian age" and going "back out into the world in a way that we had perhaps forgotten"' (Hope, *Daily Telegraph*, 15/07/2018). It seems clear that Johnson limited his language while participating in the Brexit campaign (and hopefully as party leader should the Leave campaign win) and then as Foreign Secretary. Instead, newspapers such as *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* provided that imagery for him. Once released from his constraints, he was able to use much more vivid imagery in his speeches, and he wasted no time in doing so, reflecting perhaps his true option on Britain's status and being more open in his pitch to ethnocentric voters. This suggests that while Johnson may have officially distanced himself from such wartime or colonial imagery, unofficially, he was happy not only to accept its use within the Brexit campaign, but also for it to be attached to him for his own benefit.

Conclusion

This article has focused on Boris Johnson and his media representation while an MP from May 2015, until his resignation as Foreign Secretary in July 2018. It has asked whether Johnson utilised historic imagery of Britain to appeal to ethnocentric voters. Did Johnson, during this period, engage in the 'culture wars' for his own benefit? In terms of his articles, speeches and blog entries during the period, the answer is no. Johnson did not use the imagery of Britain's wartime experience or empire to create a nostalgic, jingoistic image of Britain for his audience, although it seems that increasingly, from January 2018 onwards, he was linked by journalists to such imagery, before eventually beginning to use that imagery himself from July 2018 onwards. His position as Foreign Secretary appears to have

constrained his speech. The *Daily Telegraph* rarely linked Johnson to such imagery, although he is often portrayed as an eccentric politician of yesteryear, uncritically proud of England's past glories. In the *Daily Mail* he was linked increasingly to this rhetoric from January 2018 onwards as the original Brexit deadline approached. However, analysis showed *The Sun* newspaper did link Johnson repeatedly to strong historic imagery of Britain, and that Johnson himself, in an interview with the paper just before the EU referendum date, utilised a wide-range of historic imagery to pull at the heartstrings of identity driven voters keen to resurrect a Britain from a more nostalgic age (Hawkes, Davidson and Cole, 23rd June 2016).

It is inevitable that, as the deadline for Britain leaving the EU edged closer, those on both sides became more vociferous in their arguments and the accompanying imagery became more powerful. This article has proved that in the period May 2015 to July 2018 Johnson was linked to the nostalgic imagery of 'Great' Britain and its wartime and colonial past. However, this tended to be done via articles in *The Sun* newspaper rather than via Johnson's own articles or his blog entries. Other right-wing, pro-Conservative newspapers tended not to make such blatant links until Johnson resigned from Cabinet, presumably when he was more comfortable with these links being made. Officially, Johnson was not an MP or Secretary of State who explicitly referred to this wartime imagery, but the existence of such linkages in newspapers, such as *The Sun,* suggest that he may have unofficially accepted the conflation of his own self-image with those wartime and colonial emblems and totems. The political strength of these calls to ethnocentric voters, focusing on British identity, helped to propel Johnson into Downing Street and keep him there.

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