A DISUNITED KINGDOM?

BREXIT, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE RISE OF POLARISATION THROUGH ECHO CHAMBERS

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Photo credit: Grizelda, The Spectator, www.spectator.co.uk/comic/polarisation

ABSTRACT

On the 23rd June 2016, the 'Brexit' referendum was held in the UK. Although it was intended by British politicians to unite the country amid the brewing Euroscepticism, it resulted in creating a country that is more divided than ever. With the rise of social media, Facebook was a key component for both Leave and Remain to use during campaigning. As such, this thesis aims to provide insights into the dynamics of polarisation on Facebook that occurred during the 2016 Brexit Referendum campaign. It explores the process of online polarisation and proposes a way to operationalise and measure its resonance and dissemination, through the use of mechanisms defined by Charles Tilly and his collaborators. The thesis analyses (1) the Facebook pages of both sides of the campaign, Leave and Remain, and (2) a pro-EU media outlet Facebook page, The Guardian. By analysing these pages, this thesis identifies the echo chambers Leave and Remain voters situated themselves in. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis is used throughout the thesis, studying reactions, shares and comments on posts found on the Facebook pages. In doing so, the presence of mechanisms that facilitated a polarising political divide in society are identified. Whilst it has been almost 20 years since online polarisation was first predicted, this thesis explains how the increase in internet access and the rise in social media usage has exacerbated online polarisation. Through using the case of Brexit, this thesis highlights online polarisation as a significant issue that will continue to spread unless measures are taken to reduce and combat it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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On the 24th June 2016, I woke up and rolled over in my bed, picking my phone up off my nightstand. The first message that lit up on my screen was from my friend, it read 'I can't believe we're leaving'. *Leaving what? I thought. We had just finished our university exams. Leaving uni, did she mean? And in that bliss, half second stuck in a liminal state, I didn't realise what she meant. Then it hit me. We were leaving the European Union. I had stayed up watching the results until one or two in the morning, but the only results that had come in by that point were for 96% Remain from Gibraltar. I went to sleep believing we would Remain. My family all voted Remain, my friends all voted Remain. I convinced my grandma to vote Remain by telling her to vote for what the future generation (and me) wanted. None of us ever believed the result would be anything other than Remain. We surrounded ourselves in an echo chamber of Remainers, convinced that if our close circles were all voting Remain, if everyone we interacted with on social media, on Facebook, was voting Remain, there was no chance Leave would win. We kept ourselves within our very own Remain bubble, both online and offline. And on that hot, summers day in June, our bubble burst.*

– personal anecdote.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF BREXIT

On the 23rd of June 2016, after 70 days of official campaigning, the United Kingdom (UK) voted to leave the European Union (EU), in a referendum more commonly known as 'Brexit'. The vote was incredibly close, with a turnout of 71.8% and more than 30 million people voting, the Leave side won by 51.9% to Remain of 48.1%.[1] Initially, the UK was due to leave the EU on the 29th March 2019, two years after invoking Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty, however as no withdrawal agreement has yet been agreed, this date has been extended. At the time of writing this thesis, the current date for the UK to 'Brexit' is the 31st October 2019.

There are many different arguments as to why the Brexit referendum was called. Some argue it was because the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, wanted to appease the far-right supporters so as not to lose votes. Others accredit the financial crash of 2008 and the fall in living standards as the beginning of the resentment towards European migrants working in the UK, and as such, a rise in more widespread Euroscepticism.[2] Either way, by calling the referendum, Cameron and his Conservative government sought to unite the country and thereby settle the EU issue.[3] However, three years later, with the date of Brexit having been extended, the country is more divided than ever, there is no confirmation of a deal and the UK risks leaving without one completely. Rather than uniting the country, Brexit resulted in creating a polarising political division in society. This thesis will seek to provide insights into the dynamics of polarisation on social media, analysing reactions, shares and comments made on Facebook pages by Leavers and Remainers.

HOW TO DEFINE POLARISATION

The Oxford Dictionary defines polarisation as the 'division into two sharply contrasting groups or sets of opinions or beliefs'.[4] Although brief, this gives a summary of what polarisation ultimately amounts to. Bart Brandsma believes polarisation to be completely normal,

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[1] BBC, 'Brexit: All you need to know about the UK leaving the EU' (10 May 2019) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-32810887> accessed 19 June 2019
[2] Charlie Cooper and Oliver Wright, 'Brexit: What is it and why are we having an EU referendum?' (23 June 2016) The Independent <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/what-is-brexit-why-is-there-an-eu-referendum-a7042791.html> accessed 20 January 2019
[3] Andrew Grice, 'David Cameron wanted to unite us – he has just shown how divided we really are' (24 June 2016) The Independent <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/brexit-eu-referendum-result-david-cameron-latest-live-britain-leaves-european-union-a7099216.html> accessed 5 July 2019
[4] Oxford Dictionary <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/polarization> accessed 17 April 2019

something that is needed in order for civilisation to develop.[5] However, it is when a distinction between 'us versus them' begins to occur that a society filled with polarisation can turn hostile, and it is at this point that the sharply contrasting opinions become problematic. The Radicalisation Awareness Network explains how a polarised situation that highlights an 'us versus them' ideology can amplify the possibility of making people vulnerable to radicalisation and, in turn, violent extremism and terrorism.[6] They discuss the increase in polarisation that has spread throughout Europe, 'in which strong, hateful 'us and them' feelings are rife'[7] and have been catalysed through mass media channels and social media, furthered by echo chambers and filter bubbles. The definition of polarisation, along with its causes and dynamics, will be further explored in the first chapter.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Nine out of ten people in the UK had access to the internet in their home in 2018,[8] and with the number of social media users worldwide in 2019 nearing 3.5 billion, compared to less than 1 billion users in 2010[9], access to the internet and social media is most definitely on the rise. With it being so heavily used in many people's day-to-day lives, during Brexit, it was a key aspect in the campaigns of both Leave and Remain. However, it was primarily used to mobilise millions to vote Leave. As such, the balance between the Remain campaign and the Leave campaign online was not equal; activity of Leave campaigners outnumbered Remain by seven to one on Twitter, and five to one on Instagram[10]. Despite this, many Remainers did not believe that the wide use of social media by Leavers to campaign for Brexit would impact it. Vyacheslav Polonski writes that Remain supporters 'believed that Britain would never vote to leave the EU and discounted social media as a playground for trolls and teenagers'.[11]

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[5] Anne Tastula, 'Polarisation is the opposite of social inclusion: Bart Brandsma interview' (Elm Magazine, 21 December 2017) <https://www.elmmagazine.eu/articles/polarisation-is-the-opposite-of-social-inclusion/> accessed 17 April 2019
[6] Radicalisation Awareness Network, 'RAN POL and EDU meeting on 'Polarisation Management'' (Stockholm, 10-11 May 2017) 3
[7] Ibid 5
[8] Ofcom, 'The Communications Market 2018: Summary' (2 August 2018) <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/cmr/cmr-2018/summary> accessed 15 May 2019
[9] Dave Chaffey, 'Global Social Media Research Summary 2019' (12 Feb 2019) Smart Insights <https://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/> accessed 15 May 2019
[10] Vyacheslav Polonski, 'Impact of social media on the outcome of the EU referendum' EU Referendum Analysis 2016 <http://www.referendumanalysis.eu/eu-referendum-analysis-2016/section-7-social-media/impact-of-social-media-on-the-outcome-of-the-eu-referendum/> accessed 12 January 2019
[11] Ibid

It has also been commonly argued that both Remainers and Leavers believed that the other would not win[12], as each side were stuck in their own echo chamber, especially online, only reading opinions and beliefs on social media that aligned with their own. This thesis will analyse if both Leavers and Remainers selectively exposed themselves, whether consciously or sub-consciously, to only surround themselves with those who supported their side of the campaign. Often, algorithms created on social media allow individuals to remain in a filter bubble, once again, seeing only posts and comments that align with their thinking. Academic analysis of echo chambers, selective exposure and filter bubbles can be found in chapter one, Manifestations of Polarisation Online.

Although the resonance and dissemination of polarisation occurred both on and offline throughout Britain, the prevalence of polarisation on social media throughout the world is only just being understood and accepted, seen through more recent in-depth studies that will be discussed in chapter one. Therefore, this thesis will primarily focus on polarisation online, exacerbated by the manifestations listed above, in order to make a theoretical contribution to this field.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Cadwalladr states that the Brexit referendum took place almost entirely online[13], thus the online campaign contributed significantly to the outcome of Brexit. With the Leave campaign spending more than £2.7 million on targeted Facebook adverts[14], this provides a basis for the need to explore polarisation specifically on Facebook. In order to disaggregate polarisation online, Farrell states that 'framing mechanisms can help us understand the consequences of the internet'.[15] As such, I have developed my research question as follows: Insofar as the Brexit referendum was intended by politicians to unite the country and settle the EU issue, what mechanisms facilitated the resonance and dissemination of a polarising political division in society, as exhibited on social media, in the United Kingdom, during the 2016 referendum campaign?

This thesis will aim to answer the research question by analysing (1) the Facebook pages of both sides of the campaign, Leave and Remain, and (2) a pro-EU media outlet Facebook page, The Guardian. By analysing Leavers' activity on a Leave campaign page,

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[12] Ibid
[13] Carole Cadwalladr, 'Facebook's role in Brexit – and the threat to democracy' Ted Talk <https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy/up-next?language=en> accessed 7 July 2019
[14] BBC, 'Vote Leave's targeted Brexit ads released by Facebook' (26 July 2018) <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-44966969> accessed 7 July 2019
[15] Henry Farrell 'The Consequences of the Internet for Politics' (2012) Annual Review of Political Science 39

and Remainers' activity on a Remain campaign page, this thesis will aim to identify how each side acts within their own echo chamber, operationalising polarisation online through the use of mechanisms. Leavers' activity will be analysed on The Guardian Facebook page, in order to identify how they act when they cross the ideological divide and examine if this is different to within their own chamber. In order to analyse the different pages, this thesis will use both quantitative and qualitative data, looking at reactions, shares and comments on posts. As comments are considered the highest method of engagement for Facebook users[16], there will be a larger focus on this qualitative data than on the quantitative data provided by reactions and shares.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The academic relevance of this research is demonstrated as it explores the process of online polarisation and proposes a way to operationalise and measure it using mechanisms. In doing so, this adds to the existing literature of Tilly and Tarrow[17], modernising their definitions of mechanisms (found in chapter one) by adjusting the methods of measuring them online. Disaggregating the online polarisation process is significant as it contributes to understanding predictions made by academics surrounding this topic, more than 20 years ago.[18]

The empirical relevance occurs as a result of the sharp rise in social media, which has a societal impact on individual's everyday lives. Social media allows individuals to find others with similar interests and shared views, which has brought minority groups together to form online campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo. By giving campaigns such as these a global platform, social media provides an important role in political debates found in society today. This role becomes even greater surrounding the time of significant referendums or elections, and the Brexit referendum was one of the first major political campaigns to experience this, shortly followed by the 2016 US elections. Social media has become a clear addition to our daily lives, and with the growing strength it seems to have in affecting the opinions and beliefs of individuals, this research is significant as it aims to give a better understanding of this important social phenomenon.

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[16] Michael Bossetta, Anamaria Dutceac Segesten and Hans-Jörg Trenz, 'Political participation on Facebook during Brexit' (26 February 2018) Journal of Language and Politics 173-194
[17] Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder, 2007) Paradigm Publishers
[18] Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York, 1996) Random House

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

My thesis will begin with a literature review and development of the theoretical framework in chapter one, which will lay the foundations for my research. I will start by providing a better understanding of political polarisation. Then, I will discuss the importance of identity and the link between identity and polarisation, including Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory. Next, I will examine the link between polarisation, conflict and the internet, showing examples of how the rise in social media usage, explained above, has affected conflict and polarisation. I will identify three major components on the internet that enable polarisation to develop. I shall discuss the mechanisms used to operationalise polarisation, explaining the academic definitions of each and how these have developed over time; in turn, these helped to refine my research question. Finally, I will discuss a study that looks at polarisation on Facebook during Brexit and use this to build on in my results chapter.

Chapter two will include my methodology. In the introduction, I will explain my epistemological and ontological stance, followed by ethical considerations concerning my personal bias. I will then explain the Facebook app I used, Netvizz, that helped with collecting data. Next, I will show how the methods I took to create a sample and explain that I am primarily focusing on the comments on Facebook posts as they show the highest form of engagement on Facebook. I explain how I analysed the data through the analytical tools and instruments I developed from the mechanisms that operationalise polarisation. Finally, I will explain any limitations I came across when collecting, sampling or analysing the data.

My results will be displayed in chapter three. For the first part of my research, I will look at results from the Vote Leave and Leave.EU Facebook pages together, followed by the Campaign to Remain Facebook page. I will show how my analytical tools provided insights into the dynamics of polarisation which had developed on the Facebook pages. For the second part of my research, building on the study mentioned previously, I will analyse Leave users' activity on The Guardian Facebook page.

Finally, my conclusion will state that as the mechanisms were present on the Facebook pages I analysed, they facilitated the dissemination and resonance of a polarising divide in society, exacerbated by the growing use of social media in today's society. I will provide ideas for further research that may be necessary to build on the gaps in my own research. I will end this thesis by providing recommendations for combatting polarisation and discuss methods different organisations are taking in order to help reduce polarisation in society.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

As laid out in the previous chapter, the following literature review will aim to understand what political polarisation is.[19] It will then examine how identity is at the core of polarisation both on and offline, and the arguments surrounding the link between polarisation, conflict and the internet. By identifying how polarisation manifests itself, the theoretical framework will be explored, showing how certain mechanisms facilitate polarisation online. A study analysing polarisation online on Facebook during Brexit will also be discussed. After my conclusion, I will provide a mind map to visualise how the mechanisms feed into one another.

WHAT IS POLITICAL POLARISATION?

Political polarisation is defined by Tilly and Tarrow as 'increasing ideological distance between political actors or coalitions'.[20] This builds on the Oxford Dictionary definition quoted in the introduction, as it specifies the type of contrasting opinion (ideological) and the particular group (political actor or coalition) involved in the process. Tilly and Tarrow's general definition of polarisation can also be applied when looking at polarisation online. Although online polarisation may be considered a relatively new phenomena due to the rise in internet access and social media usage over the last ten to fifteen years, it was more than 20 years ago, in 1996, that Negroponte predicted that the internet might lead to greater political polarisation and extremism.[21] He was not the only one to predict this either, although one of the first. In 2001, Sunstein argued that the internet 'will reduce contact between people with dissimilar points of view and increase political polarisation'[22], later referring to polarisation on the internet as a 'real phenomena' and coining the term 'cyberpolarisation'.[23] The internet allows individuals to find others with similar interests and shared views, thus 'bringing like-minded people together'[24], a factor some may believe to be extremely useful in this day and age.

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[19] Other types of polarisation include, but are not limited to, social polarisation, cultural polarisation and group polarisation. Due to the Brexit referendum being a political vote, I chose to focus on political polarisation.

[20] Tilly and Tarrow (n 17) 217

[21] Negroponte (n 18)

[22] Farrell (n 15) 40

[23] Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (2007) Princeton University Press 60

[24] Farrell (n 15) 40

Others argue it is due to this reason that political polarisation is increasing online, in this era of technological advances.

IDENTITY AND POLARISATION

Henri Tajfel, along with his student John Turner, first developed the Social Identity Theory (SIT) in the 1970s, which allowed individuals to identify themselves in terms of the group to which that person belongs.[25] The theory creates an in-group and out-group mentality, as is found within the 'us versus them' distinction. Polarisation naturally flows from one's identity, hence the importance of understanding identity when studying polarisation, both online and offline. Historically, identity has never been formed without the concept of the 'other', or 'them'; it can even be traced back to Roman times with the Romans and the 'barbarians'. Forming an in-group, as opposed to an out-group, is a human instinct; we have a natural tendency and willingness to belong to groups, and from this instinct, polarisation is born. This instinct can be created consciously or sub-consciously, which links to the idea of selective exposure[26]; individuals selectively choose who or what to associate themselves with, preferring not to associate with those in the out-group. Such division 'creates competitive and antagonistic intergroup relations and can serve to further heighten identification with the in-group'.[27] Furthermore, identities are often seen to be conflicting with one another, with some arguing that individuals can only carry one specific identity. This brings about divisions in societies that incorporate immigrants and ethnic cultures, which can give rise to the 'social processes of maintaining boundaries'.[28] The formation of group boundaries can, in some cases, cause group hostility, which becomes problematic in a society filled with polarisation. As such, boundary formation surrounding different out-groups, and the hostility towards them, played a large factor during Brexit, as will be demonstrated in the results chapter.

Individuals tend to be attracted to like-minded people, or those who have a similar identity to them. Parsell explains that being exposed to similar opinions to oneself only increases prejudices towards others and thus results in polarisation.[29] Following from this, not only can the internet exacerbate polarisation 'by encouraging active participation and obscuring individual difference',[30] identities can be shaped and transformed as a result of

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[25] Henri Tajfel and John Turner, 'The social identity theory of inter-group behaviour' in S Worchel and L Austen, *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Chicago, 1986)
[26] Selective exposure will be discussed further in the Manifestations of Polarisation Online section below
[27] Sara Hobolt, Thomas Leeper and James Tilley, 'Divided by the Vote: Affective Polarization in the Wake of Brexit' (2018)
[28] Jolle Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict* (2nd edn, Routledge 2017) 25
[29] Mitch Parsell, 'Pernicious virtual communities: identity, polarisation and the Web 2.0' (2008) Ethics and Information Technology 10:41
[30] Ibid

polarisation on social media. As such, identity is not only able to contribute to the dissemination and resonance of polarisation, both online and offline, it is at the core of the debate. Ebner confirms the online aspect of this, stating that 'rapidly changing economic, political and cultural environments have led to a global identity crisis that is further exacerbated by modern technology and the new media'.[31]

Social Identity Theory identifies the underlying layer and intrinsic need for people to belong that, ultimately, brings about polarisation. Hobolt et al explain the link between Brexit and SIT, in that 'Social Identity Theory suggests that salient group identities emerge when people are compelled to take sides in a debate'.[32] As the referendum had two clear sides, Leave and Remain, Brexit thus fits within the debate surrounding Tajfel's theory. In a similar way to Hobolt et al, my research will also examine how 'Leaver and Remainer identities stereotype those on each side of the divide and the extent to which they display prejudice against their Brexit out-group'.[33] I will be looking at the comments of Leavers and Remainers on Facebook campaign pages, analysing if they display a Leave versus Remain divide, as opposed to Hobolt et al's study which looked at this divide offline. SIT is useful in my research as it enables one to identify these stereotypes, showing that the role of identity was a 'driving force behind the June 2016 referendum', which 'exposed and deepened political and societal divisions'.[34] These divisions were vital in the formation of boundaries, a key aspect when defining identity and contributing to a polarising society.

POLARISATION, CONFLICT AND THE INTERNET

The internet has created a 'new era where collective action does not depend on large political machines,'[35] and with this, the first appearance of social media affecting the levels of conflict came about during the Arab Spring, which began in late 2010. Farrell explains that, during the uprisings, 'social media provided the movement with necessary scaffolding and a means of organising outside the control of the state'.[36] If it was not for the increase in access to mobile phones and the availability of the internet, public frustration would not have been

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[31] Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (2017) I.B. Tauris 197
[32] Hobolt et al (n 27)
[33] Ibid 9
[34] Mohamed El-Erian, 'Brexit won't affect only the UK – it has lessons for the global economy' (26 November 2018) The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/nov/26/brexit-uk-global-economy-eu> accessed 19 June 2019
[35] Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalisation in American Politics* (2018) Oxford University Press 343
[36] Farrell (n 15) 44

translated into action.[37] Another example of social media, or more specifically, Facebook, assisting in the rise of conflict and the spread of hate can be seen in Myanmar, a country where less than a decade ago, a sim card cost $200. When this price dropped to a mere $2, the internet became far more accessible. This led to an increasing number of anti-Rohingya hate messages being spread, some of which took Facebook almost five years to remove,[38] and had the overall effect of increasing conflict and polarisation in the country. Although the case of Brexit has not given rise to such extremity, the Arab Spring and the case of Myanmar provide evidence of the effects of social media in regard to conflict and polarisation over the last ten years. The online polarisation that occurred during these events allowed for an increase in the mobilisation of collective action, thus enabling it as a driver. It therefore provides a basis for the continued need to research this highly relevant issue.

Many studies have suggested that opinions on the internet are not polarised and that individuals use of social media has increased their exposure to ideologically diverse information, as opposed to limiting them to content that aligns with their own views. Bakshy et al conducted a study in 2015, in which they examined how 10.1 million U.S Facebook users interact with socially shared news, looking at homophily and algorithms. They found that 'there is substantial room for individuals to consume more media from the other side'[39], thus, in turn, effectively limiting online polarisation. In Gentzkow and Shapiro's study, where they similarly focused on online news consumption, they also found 'no evidence that the internet is becoming more segregated over time.'[40] Finally, in a 2011 reflection paper by Lynch, discussing the Arab Spring, he found it 'difficult to demonstrate rigorously that these new [online] media directly cause any of the outcomes with which they have been associated.'[41]

Despite the findings in these studies, Bakshy et al concluded that it is individuals who have the power to expose themselves to 'perspectives from the other side in social media',[42] demonstrating that polarisation can occur as a result of selective exposure, as opposed to echo chambers and the effects of algorithms (discussed below). Lynch also admitted that Facebook played a significant role, if only with that of more traditional media. Gentzkow and Shapiro, on the other hand, believed that their findings 'may mitigate concerns expressed by

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[37] Ibid

[38] BBC, 'The country where Facebook posts whipped up hate' (12 September 2018) <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-45449938> accessed 28 March 2019

[39] Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing, Lada Adamic, 'Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook' (5 June 2015) American Association for the Advancement of Science 1131

[40] Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro, 'Ideological Segregation Online and Offline' (13 April 2010) Chicago Booth Initiative on Global Markets Working 1

[41] Marc Lynch, 'After Egypt: the limits and promise of online challenges to the authoritarian Arab state' (2011) Perspectives on Politics 302

[42] Bakshy et al (n 39) 1132

Sunstein and others that the internet will increase ideological polarisation'.[43] However, that particular study took place in 2010. In April 2019, Gentzkow carried out another study, along with three other academics, in which they looked at the effects of Facebook users in the US deactivating their Facebook accounts for four weeks. They found that deactivation makes people 'less polarised by at least some measures, consistent with the concern that social media have played some role in the recent rise of polarisation in the US'.[44] This transition over time in studies makes sense due to the rise of social media usage and the impact that this has on society; the role of the internet now plays a greater role in everyday life and, in turn, has an impact on polarisation. Further from this, certain elements that are found online enable the manifestation of polarisation on the internet, which will be discussed in the next section.

MANIFESTATIONS OF POLARISATION ONLINE

In 2008, Sunstein rewrote his 2001 book *Republic.com*, this time titling it *Republic.com 2.0.* He did so as a result of the increase in terrorism (his first book was written before the events of 9/11), the change in technology and in particular, to explore the increase and the dangers of echo chambers. Sunstein maintains that the internet serves as a 'breeding ground for extremism…because like-minded people are deliberating with greater ease and frequency with one another, often without hearing contrary views.'[45] This can be referred to as an echo chamber. Echo chambers provide a space in which we constantly hear our own thoughts about what is right and wrong, bounced back to us as we go about our daily lives. They are exacerbated by the algorithms used on social media channels, which are known to cause filter bubbles, a term coined by Eli Pariser in his book *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You.* These two terms, echo chambers and filter bubbles, have often been used interchangeably, but, although there are links between the two, it is important to remember that they are not the same. Filter bubbles specifically involve algorithms, whereas echo chambers do not necessarily have to. Although filter bubbles exacerbate echo chambers, it is not feasible to look at how algorithms affected polarisation during the Brexit referendum campaign. Each individual's newsfeed is personalised to them and then disappears, so it is impossible to research what the Facebook algorithm shows to Facebook users. Thus, how filter bubbles contributed to the manifestation of polarisation online will not be analysed.

Despite the similarities between the two, echo chambers and filter bubbles differ markedly from selective exposure, which occurs as 'individuals have a tendency to consume

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[43] Gentzkow and Shapiro (n 40) 24
[44] Hunt Allcott, Luca Braghieri, Sarah Eichmeyer and Matthew Gentzkow, 'The Welfare Effects of Social Media' (Stanford, 1 April 2019) 35
[45] Sunstein (n 23) 69

media which aligns with their views and beliefs and avoid such content that is different in perspective or even challenging to their position.'[46] Effectively, selective exposure arises as a result of the individual's actions, whether they are aware they are doing so or not. This is in line with homophily, where individuals tend to seek out or be attracted to those who are of a similar disposition to themselves. As previously mentioned, this also links to the concept of Social Identity Theory, with in-groups and out-groups, and individuals showing affinity towards their own group as opposed to those with a different perspective.

Ebner describes how 'social media platforms, which were created with the aim of 'connecting people' are increasingly contributing to online segregation according to class or political attitude through the formation of echo chambers.'[47] With selective exposure being self-imposed, and with filter bubbles being presented to you by the architecture of the algorithms on social media channels, the dynamic of the two results in an echo chamber, a space in which interactions between individuals can lead to polarisation. As Ebner goes on to say, 'social media has facilitated cooperation across borders between like-minded groups, creating a powerful multiplier effect'[48]. As such, this thesis uses a number of mechanisms, discussed next, to examine the manifestations of polarisation in society.

HOW MECHANISMS LINK TO ONLINE POLARISATION

McAdam, Tilly and Tarrow establish a number of mechanisms, which are, in short, 'recurring processes found in a wide variety of conflicts'[49]. Tilly explains a mechanism as 'a delimited class of events and occurrences that alter connections among social units.'[50] Farrell believes we should begin to think of the internet 'as a bundle of mechanisms that we can…disentangle from each other'[51] as this will allow us to observe 'informal communication flows, the dissemination of ideas across different social groups, and the actual network structures underlying communication.'[52] Thus, mechanisms defined by Tilly (and in his collaborations with McAdam and Tarrow) fit well with Farrell's interpretation of the internet when analysing and measuring how they facilitate polarisation on social media.

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[46] Dominic Spohr, 'Fake news and ideological polarisation: filter bubbles and selective exposure on social media' (2017) 34 Business Information Review 153
[47] Ebner (n 31) 83
[48] Ibid 63
[49] Randall Collins, 'The Contentious Social Interactionism of Charles Tilly' (2010) 73 Social Psychology Quarterly
[50] Charles Tilly, 'Mechanisms in Political Processes' (2001) 4 Annual Review of Political Science 25
[51] Farrell (n 15) 36
[52] Ibid

McAdam et al define the mechanism of diffusion as the 'transfer in the same or similar shape of forms and claims of contention across space or across sectors and ideological divides.'[53] Ayres uses the mechanism of diffusion and attributes it to the internet, redefining this modern phenomenon as 'cyber-diffusion' and defining it as 'the rapid, computer-generated dissemination of information around the world, without concern for geographic location.'[54] In this sense, cyber-diffusion has allowed 'new styles of collective action'[55], quite different to those described in the past by Tilly.[56] Farrell states that some mechanisms allow homophilous sorting within the internet, enabling individuals 'who are similar on some meaningful dimension to form clusters with each other.'[57] This links to Ayres' phenomenon of cyber-diffusion as the dissemination of information enables homophilous sorting, and thus contributes to selective exposure, and in turn, to polarisation. Although Ayres discusses that the 'internet is altering dynamics by electronically promoting the diffusion of protest ideas…across the globe'[58], his paper was written in 1999, five years before Facebook was even launched. This only strengthens his interpretation of Tilly's mechanism in the modern era, as the tactics of cyber-diffusion were globally disseminated. Once again, we see how academics predicted the effects of the internet on society several years before the effects became visible.

Homophily, and homophilous sorting, do not only link to the mechanism of cyber-diffusion, however. Brokerage is a mechanism defined as 'the joining of two or more previously less connected social sites through the intervention of third parties.'[59] Oliver uses an example of taxi drivers to explain this mechanism. She states that 'taxi drivers are 'brokers' because they meet a lot of people and can thus provide communication bridges to new groups.'[60] In this sense, social media is a 'broker' because it allows communication bridges between people who would otherwise not have met in daily life. This ties into homophily, allowing individuals to seek out those with similar views through the 'broker' of social media. Homophily can further be seen in the mechanism of attribution of similarity, which allows individuals to identify another political actor as falling within the same category as one's own.[61] In this sense, the

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[53] Doug McAdam, Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge, 2001) Cambridge University Press 68
[54] Jeffrey Ayres, 'From the Streets to the Internet: The Cyber-Diffusion of Contention' (November 1999) Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 133
[55] Ibid 135
[56] Ibid
[57] Farrell (n 15) 39
[58] Ayres (n 54) 132
[59] Tilly (n 50) 20
[60] Pamela Oliver, 'Mechanisms on Contention' in *Mobilization* (2003) 121-22
[61] Tilly and Tarrow (n 17) 215

occurrence of echo chambers and filter bubbles allowed social media users to find others with similar views.

The last mechanism useful when looking at online polarisation is boundary formation, which contributes to boundary change[62]. From it, we find the 'us versus them' distinction that provides a breeding ground for polarisation. As discussed above, it is when this distinction begins to occur that polarisation becomes hostile; using the boundary formation mechanism enables the disaggregation of identity formation processes that are at the core of polarisation. Selective exposure can exacerbate these identity formation processes. Thus, boundary formation contributes to the echo chamber and can be facilitated by brokerage and diffusion. This mechanism is vital when analysing whether polarisation has occurred, as, if present, it can produce 'serious consequences across a wide range of social interaction' and 'facilitate…mobilisation in the forms of social movements or popular rebellions'. [63]

STUDY: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ON FACEBOOK DURING BREXIT[64]

When analysing The Guardian Facebook page, my results section will build on a study carried out by Michael Bossetta, Anamaria Dutceac Sugesten and Hans-Jörg Trenz, (Bossetta et al) from the University of Copenhagen and Lund University. The study, in which they looked at political participation on Facebook during Brexit, analysed cross-posting of Leavers and Remainers onto different media outlets Facebook pages. They studied the cross-posting before, during and after campaigning, where they analysed if the patterns of cross-posters contributed to the polarisation of opinion regarding EU membership. I focused on their results during the campaign. As the study looks at polarisation on Facebook specifically surrounding Brexit, it brought together three key points of my thesis. I chose to build on the study in order to further analyse if these elements could be operationalised by the mechanisms laid out above.

They carried out the study by seeing if users posting on Remain Facebook pages would also post on pro-Brexit media outlet pages, and if users posting on Leave Facebook pages would also post on pro-EU media outlet pages. They investigated the comment patterns of cross-posters in order to find if polarisation had occurred. They formulated the view that 'polarisation is low if cross-posters engage with news from different media sources and shift between the campaigning pages' as this 'indicates exposure to a broader spectrum of political

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[62] Charles Tilly, 'Social Boundary Mechanisms' (1 June 2004) Columbia University 215
[63] Ibid 226
[64] Michael Bossetta, Anamaria Dutceac Segesten and Hans-Jörg Trenz, 'Political participation on Facebook during Brexit' (26 February 2018) Journal of Language and Politics 173-194

topics and plural opinion'.[65] They found polarisation to be high if 'cross-posters restrict their commenting to a single news outlet and campaign site' as it 'indicates exposure to a narrow selection of topics and increases the likelihood of the emergence of sharp divisions of opinion'.[66]

Bossetta et al studied six different British newspapers that each had partisan political affiliations spanning the political spectrum, and compared cross-posting with the Vote Leave, Leave.EU and Britain Stronger In Europe Facebook pages. They found that cross-posting occurred by Leave users, posting first on Leave Facebook pages and then onto pro-EU media outlet pages, however this was not the same pattern for Remainers, who tended to post only on pro-EU media pages. Thus, Bossetta et al concluded

In line with the 'filter bubble' argument, we find ideological alignment between commenters of the Remain campaign and those of left-wing and pro-EU newspapers. However, Leave campaigners did not stick to their own ideological home turf; they crossed into Remain territory more frequently and commented intensively on posts by The Guardian, the flagship outlet for pro-EU supporters.[67]

From this, one can infer that it was the Remainers who were polarised and stayed firmly in their echo chamber, surrounded by a filter bubble, as opposed to the Leavers, who appear to have stepped out of their echo chamber and conversed with those on the opposite political spectrum. Although Bossetta et al are able to come to a conclusion from their data, they admit that additional information in the form of content analysis is necessary to 'glean more accurate insights into the [cross-posters] different motivations.[68] Thus, their study is missing a qualitative analysis of the context of comments made by Leavers and Remainers, which could change their results. As their results imply that polarisation did occur with the Remain side, I decided to analyse the specific content of Leave users' comments on The Guardian's Facebook page. Doing so adds to Bossetta et al's research in order to see if their findings are correct or may be affected by the qualitative analysis.

CONCLUSION

This review of the literature enables further analysis of online polarisation, specifically when looking at the case of the Brexit referendum. The literature has shown that identity is at the core of polarisation, as displayed through Tajfel's Social Identity Theory. Online

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[65] Ibid 179
[66] Ibid
[67] Ibid 189
[68] Ibid

polarisation was predicted many years before social media became such a huge phenomenon; it took almost two decades before the general public began to acknowledge that polarisation is taking place in the online world. As it was made clear that the internet contributes to the manifestation of polarisation, elements of echo chambers, filter bubbles and selective exposure that enabled the further growth of polarisation have been discussed. In order to disaggregate the concept of online polarisation, mechanisms have been adjusted over time in order to fit the modern, online world. They are used to show how the dissemination and resonance of polarisation occurred during the Brexit referendum. From Bossetta et al's study, the decision was taken to look at reactions, shares and comments of posts on Facebook as being the most effective way to discover insights into the dynamics of polarisation. Looking once again to my research question, the mechanisms explored above helped to refine my question by providing the methods as to how I would operationalise polarisation. In order to understand how these mechanisms link to one another, while situated in the context of the Brexit referendum, I have created a mind map. This takes into account the methods used to measure mechanisms whilst analysing data on Facebook, in order to contribute to the debate on how the resonance and dissemination of a polarising political divide in society has occurred, as exhibited on social media. These can be found below, along with a short explanation.

MIND MAP
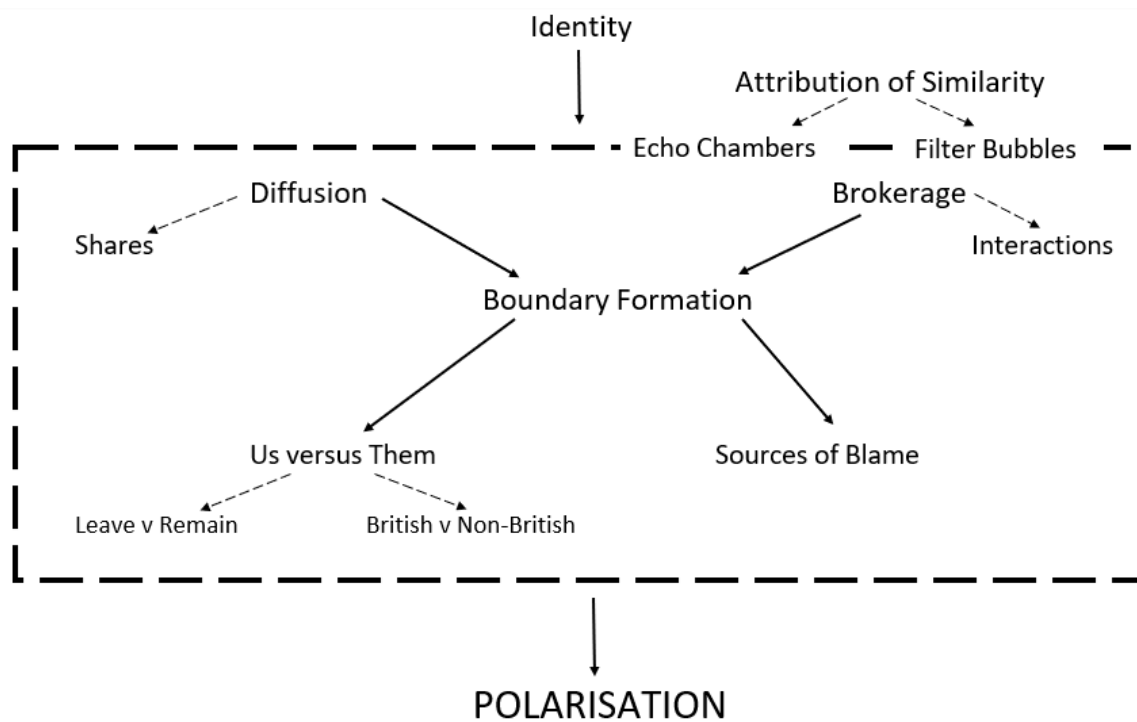
The mind map shows the mechanisms and the methods used to identify them, in order to create a visual picture of how they link together. Identity feeds into the mechanism of attribution of similarity, holding individuals in an echo chamber or a filter bubble. The remaining mechanisms sit within this chamber or bubble, with diffusion and brokerage feeding into the mechanism of boundary formation. The 'us versus them' distinctions show some of the main in-groups and out-groups made during the Brexit referendum. The mind map shows that if these mechanisms are present, the outcome is polarisation. Further clarification surrounding the mechanisms and how they are measured can be found with the analytical tools and instruments in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Due to the shorter nature of my thesis, it is not entirely based on primary data collection. Part of the primary data collected is used to back up the points made from Bossetta et al's study, and to show how the analytical tools and instruments can be used to facilitate the dissemination and resonance of polarisation. My document analysis of the growing academic literature, and my construction of the theoretical framework both found in chapter one, led to formulating the tools and instruments seen below.

My thesis takes an individualist ontological stance as it is consistent with Tilly's perspective as a realist, hence the reason for focusing on his work when operationalising the empirical context of this thesis primarily by mechanisms. When studying social identity approaches, Tajfel also takes an individualist stance, as the approaches 'explain human conduct by the individual's need for group living, differentiation and inclusion'.[69] As I have shown that identity is vital for polarisation to occur, it makes sense that my ontological stance is consistent with where social identity approaches sit in the Hollis matrix. The epistemological stance of my thesis is positivist, as this 'explanation' stance 'assumes that the social world must be explained in terms of casual explanations based on the workings of systems, structures, or some larger whole'.[70] Demmers also identifies social identity approaches, and Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, as being positivist, as there is an emphasis on 'explaining human action from without, rather than understanding it from within'. [71] As such, my ontological and epistemological stances align with both Tilly's and Tajfel's.

I am conscious of my personal bias as Remainer, however, in this thesis I am not advocating for one side or another, rather I aim to understand and disaggregate the process that occurred during the Brexit referendum, in order to establish the processes whereby polarisation is formed. Through creating the analytical tools and instruments I have ensured that my bias as a result of my own voting patterns did not interfere with carrying out my analysis of the Facebook comments. Furthermore, by analysing both the Leave and Remain side, and by using the results of Bossetta et al's study, I have ensured that the data was looked at impartially.

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[69] Demmers (n 28) 55
[70] Ibid
[71] Ibid 56

RESEARCH METHOD

Netvizz

To collect the data, I used a Facebook application (app) called Netvizz, which is a 'a data collection and extraction application that allows researchers to export data in standard file formats from different sections of the Facebook social networking service'.[72] The app is free and can be accessed through Facebook, having been in development for the last ten years.[73] When using Netvizz, it immediately notes that the application has not passed Facebook's app review for the 'Page Public Content Access', and as such, may stop working. The creator of Netvizz, Bernhard Rieder, explained that this happened because of the stricter terms for Facebook apps, which occurred after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and thus made independent research a lot harder.[74] Rieder explains more about the app and how it is used in his academic paper *Studying Facebook via Data Extraction: The Netvizz Application*.[75]

Collecting and Sampling Data

Using Netvizz enabled the collection of disaggregated data from the Facebook pages, so that I had everything in one place and was able to analyse it in an excel document. Netvizz allows you to extract the text of the post, the number of shares and reactions on the post, and all the comments on the post, including the number of likes per comment. Using the app also helped with anonymising Facebook users whose comments I was analysing, as Netvizz does not show the name of the person who posted the comments. Although I am also analysing the number of shares of posts and the reactions to them, as mentioned above, I decided to look in depth at the comments on posts; as mentioned previously, comments are ranked as one of the highest forms of engagement by Facebook's algorithms.[76] Bosetta et al argue that they are 'one of the best approximations for political engagement on social media',[77] with which I fully agree. For the first part of my research, studying how individuals act within their own echo chamber, I looked at three different campaign pages: two Leave pages, Vote Leave and Leave.EU and one Remain page, Campaign for Remain. Vote Leave was part of the official Leave campaign and stopped all posting by the end of the day on the 23rd June 2016, and Leave.EU and Campaign for Remain were unofficial pages, both continuing to post today. I

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[72] Bernhard Rieder, 'Studying Facebook via Data Extraction: The Netvizz Application' (2 May 2013) University of Amsterdam

[73] Bernhard Rieder, 'Facebook's app review and how independent research just got a lot harder (11 August 2018) The Politics of Systems <http://thepoliticsofsystems.net/2018/08/facebooks-app-review-and-how-independent-research-just-got-a-lot-harder/> accessed 25 June 2019

[74] Ibid

[75] Reider (n 72) 176

[76] Ibid

[77] Ibid

looked at the unofficial Remain page as the official Remain campaign page had been deleted, an issue I refer to in my limitations below. For the second part of my research, analysing Leave user's activity on The Guardian's Facebook page, outside of their echo chamber, I also used Netvizz.

Netvizz allows you to extract posts during a certain time frame, so my first method of limiting the data was to only look at posts on these pages during the official campaign, which spanned 70 days from the 15th of April 2016 until the day of the vote, on the 23rd June 2016. When looking at The Guardian, I manually refined these posts further by selecting only the ones that were to do with Brexit, as opposed to worldwide news. As the others were campaign pages, all posts had reference to Brexit. However, when extracting the comments from the pages I found I needed to refine this further as the numbers were far too high for me to be able to analyse; the Vote Leave page had 458,913 comments on the 406 posts that were made during the campaign. Netvizz has another tool that allows you to extract only the 'top ranked' comments, so I used this to create a smaller data set for each page I was looking at. Although I searched for it, Netvizz never defines what it means by 'top ranked', however it appeared to be the comments with the highest engagement, usually in the form of the most reactions. Table one shows how many posts and comments each of the pages had, and how many comments were analysed. The Guardian page has already been refined to only include posts that were Brexit related, and the comments on these particular posts only.

	Vote Leave	Leave.EU	Campaign to Remain	The Guardian
Number of posts	406	200	78	25
Number of comments	458,913	215,008	1,939	9,708
Number of top ranked comments	6,891	3,953	534	2,882

Table 1: Number of posts and comments of Facebook pages

The sample size of the Vote Leave and Leave.EU comments were still too big for me to be able to analyse each comment feasibly and effectively, as opposed to the Campaign to Remain page, for which I decided to analyse all the comments so my sample size was adequate in comparison to the Leave pages. As I was working on an excel document, it was easy to search for certain words and terms to see how often they were mentioned, and from there, analyse the discursive nature of the comment itself. This was useful on the Vote Leave and Leave.EU pages. The three main topics that the Leave campaign centred its campaign

around were: immigration, the NHS and Turkey joining the EU. Due to time constraints, I decided to mainly focus on these topics as they were the most prominent in the offline campaign and I wanted to analyse if this was the case online as well, in voters' discussions in comments.

In order to find comments on The Guardian page that were only from Leave voters, I looked through all the top ranked comments. I found comments from Leavers with relative ease, as many began their comments with *I'm voting out because…* or ended them with quotes such as *VOTE LEAVE* or *out out out!*. From the 2,882 comments I looked through on The Guardian page, I found 382 to be from Leave voters. As this was more than ten per cent of the comments on a pro-EU media outlet page, it confirmed Bossetta et al's findings that Leave voters 'crossed into Remain territory…and commented intensively on posts by The Guardian, the flagship outlet for pro-EU supporters'.[78]

Analysing Data Using Analytical Tools and Instruments

Once the sample size was manageable, I used the following analytical tools and instruments to analyse the data. These tools helped to refine my research question by focusing on specific mechanisms and creating methods to identify if they have occurred.

Mechanism	Methods to identify if the mechanism is present	
Attribution of Similarity	Extent of echo chambers and filter bubbles	
Brokerage	Interactions	Number of reactions
		Number of comments
Diffusion	Shares	
Boundary Formation	Discussion of the 'other' – 'us versus them'	Leave versus Remain
		British versus Non-British
	Sources of blame	

Table 2: Mechanisms and how to identify them

LIMITATIONS

The biggest limitation faced when collecting the data was that the official Remain campaign's Facebook page, Britain Stronger In Europe, had been deleted. I knew that the

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[78] Bossetta et al (n 64) 189

page sizes between the Leave campaign and the Remain campaign had a similar reach[79], thus analysing it would have provided a greater sample size Remain page than the one I used. Despite the page's mention in Bossetta et al's study and being informed of the new Facebook name *Open Britain*, I was unable to find it and could only conclude that it had been deleted. Instead, I used Campaign to Remain, a far smaller Facebook page in comparison to the Vote Leave and Leave.EU pages, but the only one available that was created around the same time as the other pages and active during the campaign.

I had several limitations regarding the second part of my research, where I analysed Facebook user's activity outside of their own echo chamber. Firstly, I only analysed Leave user's activity, and did not also look at Remain user's activity on a pro-Brexit media outlet page. This was due to the feasibility and time constraints of my research. Another limitation I had when analysing The Guardian page, was the difficulty in identifying Leavers' comments. As I was only looking at the 200 top ranked comments from each post, a pro-Brexit comment might not be likely to have a high engagement rate and thus not fall into the top ranked section (provided this was how Netvizz extracted top ranked comments, as it appeared). Also, there could be more Leave comments than were found; I only studied them myself so I may not have picked up on some, or the voting intentions of those posting may not have been clear enough to realise they were Leave voters.

Finally, no matter the campaign pages and media outlet pages that I analysed, it was not known what each individual saw on their own personalised (and algorithmicised) Facebook newsfeed. For example, when analysing comments on The Guardian, I do not know if the Leave voter commenting on a post had actively sought the post out to comment on, or it had appeared on their newsfeed due to their personal algorithm.

Similar limitations surrounding the consistent problem with data access, methods, ethics and research capacity have been acknowledged in a recent report by Dommett and Power. When studying digital campaigning, they seek to 'highlight the challenges researchers face and facilitate discussion about the ways in which these challenges may be overcome'.[80] Highlighting these challenges provides a better understanding of the limitations that I faced, and shows they are a common occurrence for academics and analysts.

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[79] Andrew Mullen, 'Leave versus Remain: the digital battle' <http://www.referendumanalysis.eu/eu-referendum-analysis-2016/section-7-social-media/leave-versus-remain-the-digital-battle/> accessed 25 June 2019
[80] Katherine Dommett and Sam Power, 'The Challenges of Studying Digital Campaigning' (July 2019) The British Academy and The University of Sheffield 1

CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

Using my analytical tools and instruments, the reactions, comments and shares on the Facebook pages were analysed in order to give insights into the dynamics of polarisation and the involvement that mechanisms had on these dynamics. I expected the two Leave Facebook pages to show similar results. When looking at the comments on the two pages, I found this to be true, so I have displayed the results of both in the same section. Due to my limitations mentioned in chapter two, the analysis of the Remain Facebook page, Campaign to Remain, is far smaller and shorter than that of the Leave Facebook pages. Finally, I built on Bossetta et al's 2018 study by analysing Leavers' comments on The Guardian Facebook page.

LEAVE FACEBOOK PAGES

Attribution of Similarity

In order to prove that the mechanism of attribution of similarity had occurred, the comments needed to show that users were situated in an echo chamber. As discussed in chapter one, echo chambers occur when 'like-minded people… [deliberate] without hearing contrary views.'[81] This was made clear on both Leave pages. Through searching for terms such as *don't know anyone*, *haven't met anyone*, *who's voting in/Remain*, as well as variations of these phrases, I found seven per cent of comments on the Vote Leave page and twelve per cent of comments on the Leave.EU page that mentioned, in some way, that they had not found anyone, or did not know anyone, who was voting Remain. Examples of the comments are displayed below and show that users were very much in their own bubble of Leave, which contributes to the problematic nature of polarisation.

> *I haven't met anyone who wants to stay in, yet the tv stations say its 50/50…biased press?* (Vote Leave page)
>
> *Already voted, I'm out, my family is out... Don't know anyone who is for in, and don't bloody want to!* (Vote Leave page)

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[81] Sunstein (n 23) 69

The other half know it's gonna [sic] *be rigged!! I don't know anyone who wants in!! Should be a proper criminal investigation if we're still in after June 23rd* (Leave.EU page)

I've voted! Out out out! Does anyone know where this 46-7-8-9% of voters who are voting to Remain, actually are? I've only found one and dear friend that he is, he hates the English, enough said, bless him! But where are they? I cannot find anyone who says they are voting remain! Any sightings! (Leave.EU page)

Also, across both pages, there were repeated comments being relayed, often with elaborate stories, bouncing the same thoughts back and forth, as is most common for an echo chamber. In looking at comments that were repeated at least five times, I found 45 comments on the Vote Leave page and 37 comments on the Leave.EU page. The comments were repeated up to 39 times, and some of the same comments were even found across both pages. This facilitated the echo chamber Leavers were in as they repeatedly heard the same comments.

Based on the comments from users about not knowing anyone voting Remain, as well as the number of repeated comments, there is evidence that Leave users were in an echo chamber. Whether the effects of algorithms surrounding filter bubbles contributed to this echo chamber is not clear. As mentioned previously, as the tools are not available, it is not feasible to measure the effect of filter bubbles, especially as it is not known what posts were visible on individual's newsfeeds. That said, as there is evidence of users of the Leave Facebook pages being situated in an echo chamber, these results still show that attribution of similarity is present, despite the inability of measuring the impact of filter bubbles. The presence of attribution of similarity provides insights into the dynamics of polarisation as it contributes to the resonance and dissemination of polarisation.

Brokerage and Diffusion

Brokerage is displayed when individuals who would otherwise not connect find ways to connect with each other. In order to measure this mechanism in the modern, online world, a high number of interactions on posts (be it through comments or reactions) will prove the presence of brokerage, as the interactions provide new connections between individuals. A high level of interaction enables the dissemination of polarisation, which feeds into the formation of boundaries, and overall provides insights into the dynamics of polarisation in society.

Although the 'like' button was the original method of interacting with a post, Facebook now gives the option to interact with a post by using six different emotional reactions: like, love, haha, wow, sad and angry. Netvizz shows the individual number of reactions for each emotion, however I have only looked at the total number of the reactions per post (see table three). As I was looking at the number of reactions, shares and comments on the post itself, I did not need to refine these further, as I later did when analysing the discursive nature of the comments.

As discussed in chapter one, Ayres has developed the mechanism of diffusion to align with modern technology, or more specifically, the internet. For him, the dissemination of information around the world is known as 'cyber-diffusion'. Facebook allows for this dissemination through the tool of sharing posts. Thus, a high level of shares on posts provides for the presence of diffusion, which again feeds into the formation of boundaries.

	Vote Leave	Leave.EU
Number of posts	406	200
Number of reactions (like, love, haha, wow, sad, angry)	3,929,575	1,485,335
Number of shares	2,443,741	1,619,342
Number of comments	458,913	215,008

Table 3: Display of Diffusion and Brokerage on Leave pages

The extremely high numbers of reactions, comments and shares seen in table three provide evidence that brokerage and diffusion have occurred on both the Leave Facebook pages. With the number of interactions and shares in the millions, it is viable to infer that connections will have been made between individuals who would otherwise not have connected, and provides for homophilous sorting of these individuals, as explained by Farrell in chapter one[82], which, in turn, contributes to selective exposure. These two mechanisms feed into the creation of boundaries, and as such, the next step is to see if boundary formation has occurred when analysing the comments.

Boundary Formation

Using the analytical tools and instruments from my methodology chapter, in order to identify that boundary formation had occurred, I needed to find sources of blame and an 'us

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[82] Farrell (n 15) 39

versus them' rhetoric in the comments of Leave users on the Leave Facebook pages. Below, I provide examples where both were found, and what this means.

Although Leave.EU was the unofficial Leave campaign, it still had a large following and engaged in similar arguments to that of Vote Leave. As such, the number of comments based on the main topics that official Leave centred its offline campaign around (immigration, the NHS and Turkey joining the EU) displayed results of a similar nature on both pages. Table four shows the percentage of times each word appeared in the top ranked comments.[83] I searched the word *immigra* so as to include immigrants as well as immigration.

	Vote Leave	Leave.EU
Percentage of times the word *immigra* appeared	10.7	7.9
Percentage of times the word *NHS* appeared	8.8	4.7
Percentage of times the word *Turkey* appeared	4.4	3.0

Table 4: Percentage of times certain words were found on Leave pages

The table shows that a significant percentage of comments were discussing these topics. As they were the main topics of the Vote Leave campaign offline, I was surprised the percentage was not higher when looking at the comments on their page; they were not the most prominent topics in online discussions as I had thought. However, when analysing the context of the comments, I found that these topics were continuously used as a source of blame, one of the methods needed to prove boundary formation was present. The topics often overlapped as well, for example, blaming immigrants for the NHS crisis (as well as other crises the UK faces). Examples of comments including these topics and displaying sources of blame are displayed below:

> *The strain these immigrants put on our NHS, Schools, Housing, our whole infrastructure is crippling our country we must vote out of the corrupt EU.* (Leave.EU)

> *The NHS was created by the british for the benefit of the british and paid for every fxcking week by the british ....it is not to serve the rest of the fxcking worlds ill health ...VOTE LEAVE.* [sic] (Vote Leave)

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[83] The number of top ranked comments can be found in the methodology chapter on page 24.

Only a moron would allow a country like Turkey into the EU. They are savages who have changed little since 632AD. (Vote Leave)

Simply a matter of time before the Muslims take over the UK, it'll just happen sooner rather than later if Turkey and the others are admitted to the EU. Get out now. (Leave.EU)

The abhorrent language found in the second and third comments was a common occurrence on the Vote Leave page, although interestingly was not as high on the Leave.EU page. The sources of blame towards immigrants highlighted the first method necessary to identify the presence of boundary formation. This depiction of blame also exhibited a build-up of an 'us versus them' divide, Leave versus immigrants, the second necessary method. The comments above also show examples of this rhetoric.

Bounday formation was not only displayed through a British versus non-British, Leave versus Immigrants divide, however. Leave users exhibited that they had more than one 'other', portrayed by a Leave versus Remain divide. 14 per cent of comments on the Vote Leave page referred to Remainers, and 16.5 per cent on the Leave.EU page. These comments tended to either be abusive messages directed towards those voting Remain or attacks on the Remain campaign and the politicians campaigning for Remain:

A message to the 'Unsure' and 'Remain' voters. I don't know what is wrong with some of you people! For God's sake just grow a pair, do your duty, and vote 'Leave'. (Vote Leave)

Anyone who votes REMAIN is pissing on the graves of every Man, Woman and child who has died fighting for this country. Let's take back control (Vote Leave)

These remain muppets will believe anything. Not a bit of pride or backbone in any of them! Call themselves Britis? [sic] *No better than fleeing rats from the sewers. #takebackcontrol* (Leave.EU)

All those who vote remain want deporting! (Leave.EU)

The high percentage of references towards their Brexit out-group, displaying prejudice and stereotypes of Remainers, allowed Leavers to form their own identities and confine themselves within an in-group. By doing so, Leavers selectively exposed themselves and maintained their affinity towards the in-group. Through identifying the 'other' and analysing the discussion Leavers had when referring to the 'other', I found that the analytical tool of boundary formation had occurred in this sense.

Overall, the comments against immigrants not only displayed their sources of blame but also very much showed that Leave supporters wanted to keep *Britain British*, as one commenter wrote, while another questioned what was happening to *our white Christian population*. This 'us versus them' rhetoric highlighted the Leave versus Immigrants divide. The Leave versus Remain in-group and out-group was also highlighted, in which it allowed Leavers to firmly create their own identity boundaries and exhibit selective exposure, whilst stereotyping against the 'other'. By identifying these stereotypes, we can see the link to Social Identity Theory. Leavers situated themselves in their in-group, stereotyping, blaming and forming prejudice against the out-group, be it Remainers or immigrants. As such, with their own identity boundaries formed, Leavers provided for an increase in polarisation in society.

REMAIN FACEBOOK PAGE

After their defeat in the Brexit referendum on the 23rd June, the official Remain campaign, Britain Stronger In Europe, changed their Facebook name to Open Britain[84], however I was unable to find either one on Facebook. Instead, the first page to appear when searching for either of them was the People's Vote UK page. Although initially appearing to have changed their name for a second time, further analysis revealed that the People's Vote UK page was only created on the 5th April 2018, thus I concluded that the official Remain page had since been deleted from Facebook. This was problematic as I could no longer access the posts created during the referendum in order to analyse the interactions and engagements. The next biggest page I could find that was active during the referendum campaign, in terms of number of likes on the page itself, was Campaign to Remain. In comparison to both the Leave pages, during the time period I was analysing, this page had less than a tenth of the number of page likes, and with far fewer posts, the number of shares, reactions and comments were also low. Despite this, I still wanted to get an overview of the types of comments made by Remainers, however as the number of top ranked comments was only 534, my analysis is shorter than for the Leave pages.

Attribution of Similarity

As with the Leave pages, it was clear that Remainers on the Campaign to Remain Facebook page were situated in an echo chamber, as many commenters stated they did not know anyone that was planning on voting to Leave. As I was analysing a much smaller sample size of Remain comments than on the Leave pages, instead of having to search for certain terms, I was able to look through each comment individually. I found that nine per cent of

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[84] Bossetta et al (n 64) 180

comments mentioned that they didn't know anyone who was voting Leave, or that all their friends and family were voting Remain:

> *I think most sane people are turned off by the Brexit campaign. Everyone I know anyway.*

> *My mum is 86 and voting remain. So are all her friends. Is this age divide thing really true?*

> *I was on the fence, but I've moved towards the rest of my family now and I'm definitely voting remain.*

Once again, it is not feasible to measure the extent of algorithms, and therefore filter bubbles, that may have affected this echo chamber. However, in looking at the study carried out by Bossetta et al, they find ideological alignment that is 'in line with the 'filter bubble' argument…between commenters of the Remain campaign and those of left-wing and pro-EU newspapers'.[85] Although their study does not look at the Campaign to Remain Facebook page, from their findings, we can infer that Remainers in general were not exposed to opposing views and therefore confined themselves in a filter bubble. This, along with the comments on the Campaign to Remain Facebook page showing that Remainers only knew others also voting Remain, provides evidence that they were situated in an echo chamber, just as Leavers were. As such, the presence of attribution of similarity is clear, thus contributing to the resonance and dissemination of a polarising society.

Brokerage and Diffusion

How to measure brokerage and diffusion in the modern, online world has been explained in the section on it when looking at the Leave pages. I have used the same methods when looking at the Remain page. Although the number of reactions, shares and comments were much lower on the Campaign to Remain page in comparison to the Leave pages, this was only due to the smaller size of the page I analysed (in terms of page likes). Table five shows the exact number of them.

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[85] Ibid 189

	Campaign to Remain
Number of posts	78
Number of reactions (like, love, haha, wow, sad, angry)	11,024
Number of shares	8,954
Number of comments	1,939

Table 5: Display of Brokerage and Diffusion on Remain page

Despite the interactions and shares not reaching the millions, as on the Leave pages, the total still exceeds 20,000, on a far smaller number of posts. This number is still significant, and therefore can still provide the opportunity for homophilous sorting and individuals to connect with those they otherwise would not have connected with. As such, the mechanisms of brokerage and diffusion are present on the Campaign to Remain page, despite the smaller size of the page. Once again, this provides insights into the dynamics of polarisation as it feeds into the mechanism of boundary formation, discussed next.

Boundary Formation

The Remain campaign also centred its campaign around three main points: more jobs, lower prices and worker's rights. Despite these being the primary focus of the campaign, I found little reference to these topics in the comments of Campaign to Remain posts. The word *job* was only referred to in 11 comments, with *price* appearing in four comments (lower price did not appear in any comments) and *worker's rights* appearing in just one. Unlike the Leave campaign, where the main topics of their campaign were discussed more often in the comments and used as sources of blame, this was not the case for Remainers on the Campaign to Remain page. Instead, I found that Remainers attributed blame to only one group, the same group that they identified as the 'other': Leavers. These comments were often sarcastic, ridiculing the Leave campaign and Leavers' views of the EU:

> *Why is it* [name] *that every 'Leaver' like you types so angry, seems really pissed off, bitter and either dislikes people from places they go on holiday to get drunk - or children - in your case children (disrespectful brats you say). Yeah lets* [sic] *blame Europe for English bad parenting!!!!*

> *According to the Leave campaign, the EU is responsible for every piece of misery that has ever afflicted the UK. The NHS is over-stretched? It must be the EU's fault rather than austerity and budget cuts…*

The type of comments depicting Leavers as a source of blame often overlapped with the 'us versus them' rhetoric also made towards Leavers, consistent throughout the Remain page. An astonishing 21 per cent of comments made reference to Leavers or Brexiteers, with a further ten per cent of comments discussing Boris Johnson and six per cent mentioning Nigel Farage, two prevalent MPs that were part of the official and unofficial Leave campaigns.[86] Similarly to the language found on the Leave page, the comments on the Remain page that promoted an 'us versus them' rhetoric attacked their out-group of Leave and depicted abuse towards Leave MPs:

> Leave is joking right? They must be? Surely? Can't be true? I won't believe they are so stupid? Oh alright, they are just thick, stupid and ignorant.

> BREXIT: Boorish Ranting Extremist Xenophobic Ignorant Twerps. REMAIN: Rational European-Minded Altruistic Inclusive Nice-people.

> Boris is a buffoon and a charlatan. I cannot believe so many people are fooled by him.

> Farage is just so ugly. I want to squeeze his head like a zit.

The stereotyping and prejudice found on the Remain Facebook page is akin to that on the Leave pages, but for the opposing out-group. The 'us versus them' rhetoric Remainers created against Leavers enabled them to stoutly form their own identity, with their own in-group. Once again, this links to selective exposure and Social Identity Theory, as described in the boundary formation section of the Leave Facebook pages. Remainers' prejudice and stereotypes against Leavers and those campaigning for Leave allowed for an increase in identity boundaries as Remainers identified the 'other' as Leavers. However, this was the only formation of an out-group that Remainers made, as opposed to Leavers who formulated boundaries not only between themselves and the Remain group, but also with immigrants and non-British. Although my results do not provide for a specific reason behind this, as the Leave cause was 'perceived by others…as the 'underdog''[87], they may have felt the need to create more out-groups in order to feel powerful and united. As Bossetta et al conclude, Remainers 'may have thought that their victory was certain and thus gave a low priority to campaigning'[88], hence it was not necessary for them to create more out-groups like the Leave campaign did. Although they only had one out-group, they still exhibited boundary formation, and as such, this contributed once more to the polarisation in society.

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[86] It is important to note there was some overlap with comments that made reference to Leavers, Farage and Johnson, however Excel does not allow you to search for more than one term at a time.
[87] Bossetta et al (n 64) 190
[88] Ibid

THE GUARDIAN

Looking at The Guardian Facebook page assisted in building on the study carried out by Bossetta et al, described in chapter one. From their findings, one can infer that as Remainers did not cross-post from Remain campaign pages to pro-Brexit media outlet pages, they were polarised. Leavers, on the other hand, did cross post from Leave campaign pages to pro-EU media outlet pages. However, as the study only looked at quantitative data, I analysed the content of Leavers' comments on The Guardian in order to find out if their commenting behaviour still created a polarising divide, despite being on a pro-EU page. As I was only analysing the specific content of the comments, I did not look to see if brokerage or diffusion were present, nor attribution of similarity as Bossetta et al had already shown that Leavers pushed themselves out of their echo chamber in order to post on pro-EU pages. Overall, I focused on boundary formation, to see if the Leave commenters continued to promote an 'us versus them' divide, putting blame on the 'other'.

Thirteen per cent of the comments referenced Remain, highlighting the 'us versus them', Leave versus Remain divide. I found a similar percentage on the Leave Facebook pages as well, which shows that Leavers refer to their Brexit out-group the same amount, whether they are in their own echo chamber or outside it. The comments accused Remainers of not only being *a traitor to the country*, but also *a Nazi if you stay in*.

> *Our soldiers died for our freedom from European dictatorship, now our PM wants to give our country's sovereignty over to those they fought! All who vote 'in' should be charged with treason, including the PM!*

> *To everyone voting remain, you are standing up for a system that trades with countries that prosecute women for being raped and you have the guts to accuse people of racism and standing against human rights?... The fact that you all think this is just about whats* [sic] *happening in "your" country shows me just how racist YOU really are.*

In addition, nine per cent of the comments mentioned immigrants or immigration (once again, I searched for the term *immigra)*, five per cent of the comments mentioned the NHS and three per cent mentioned Turkey. Commenters continued to use immigrants as a source of blame for problems within Britain, accusing them of *raping, bashing and harassing the locals* and *demanding free housing*. Some maintain that comments such as the ones seen here do not make them *even close to being a racist*, they merely just want *far fewer 'brown people' around the place*.

All immigrants do is claim benefits and won't integrate and accept our laws and way of life!!!

Stay in and never be able to afford a holiday because of all the immigrant workers that will work for min wage 18 hours a day with no holidays or overtime rate because they live 15 in a three bed house so there rent is peanuts!!! Real hard working British men don't stand a chance!!! Unfair market!!! Polish only employment agencies!!!! [sic]

Speaking of liars take a good look at Camoron!!! [sic] *and his tale of Turkey joining then suddenly not joining. If you want ISIS in your area vote to stay.*

Overall, the comments written by Leavers on The Guardian Facebook page show that despite crossing over into Remain territory, they only did so in order to 'troll' the Remainers known to be there. Their abhorrent language, along with the 'us versus them' rhetoric and continued blame towards immigrants, provides evidence of the hostility they were displaying towards Remainers. Leavers acted the same way within their own echo chamber, on the Leave Facebook pages, as they did when they were outside their echo chamber, in Remain territory, proven by the similar percentages when looking at the sources of blame, specifically on immigrants, and the 'us versus them' divide against Remainers. Farrell identified a similar occurrence when examining if the internet was helping to polarise American politics. When looking at Twitter, he found that despite Twitter hashtags often being created to attract attention from users on the other side of the political spectrum, 'much of this exchange [was] intended to provoke rather than to persuade'.[89] As such, boundary formation did occur; Leavers did not cross the ideological divide to come out of their echo chambers, instead analysis of the data shows they were doing so merely to provoke Remainers and continue to promote a society filled with a polarising divide.

CONCLUSION

By operationalising the mechanisms, my results showed that both the Leave and the Remain Facebook pages had elements of attribution of similarity, brokerage, diffusion and boundary formation. Based on my results from the Leave pages, I identified the link between Social Identity Theory and polarisation, showing that the in-group and out-group context that appears within SIT formulates a basis for boundary formation. Although I identified sources of blame, my research here was limited; as I only chose three specific topics to look at within the comments, I cannot determine that these are the only sources of blame Leave users created,

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[89] Farrell (n 15) 41

nor was I able to prove they were the most prominent topics discussed. This shows the necessity for further research to be conducted on this subject. Further research to give more accurate insight into why Leavers felt the need to create more than one out-group would also be beneficial. However, as my results still demonstrate that the mechanisms were present on the Leave Facebook pages, the combination of all four show that the resonance and dissemination of polarisation has occurred and gives insights into the dynamics of polarisation that have been created on social media.

Although the data was limited when studying the Remain Facebook page, it was still feasible to analyse all the comments when looking for evidence of attribution of similarity and boundary formation, rather than only searching for specific terms. The identification of brokerage and diffusion fed into identifying the next mechanism. Despite Remainers only maintaining the 'us versus them' divide when it came to Remain versus Leave, as opposed to creating more than one out-group as Leavers did, by viewing Leave as their Brexit out-group and using them as a source of blame, Remainers still selectively exposed themselves, thus exhibited notions of boundary formation. By forming these group boundaries, SIT explains that this can cause group hostility, and thus facilitates the dissemination and resonance of a polarising divide in society, which is shown by the presence of all mechanisms on the Remain Facebook page.

Finally, Bossetta et al stated that they could not confidently conclude whether 'those who crossed the ideological divide did so in a deliberative or spiteful manner'.[90] Through analysing the Leave comments on The Guardian Facebook page, I have shown the presence of boundary formation and can therefore conclude that Bossetta et al were correct to admit the need to extend their research further, through content analysis. My analysis showed that Leavers did cross the ideological divide in a spiteful manner, they remained firmly within a polarising divide, continuing to preach an 'us versus them' rhetoric against Remainers, as well as immigrants, despite being outside their own echo chamber and moving into Remain territory.

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[90] Bossetta et al (n 64) 188

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This thesis sought to operationalise polarisation by looking at the mechanisms that facilitate it in an online environment. It set out to answer the following research question: Insofar as the Brexit referendum was intended by politicians to unite the country and settle the EU issue, what mechanisms facilitated the resonance and dissemination of a polarising political division in society, as exhibited on social media, in the United Kingdom, during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign?

The research is significant as it modernises the methods used to identify the presence of mechanisms online, by building on Tilly and Tarrow's definitions. Disaggregating the online polarisation process has added to the existing literature of Sunstein and Negroponte, using a specific case study to prove their claims. As polarisation occurred during one of the most significant referendums the country has ever witnessed, the possibility for this to happen in future referendums and elections across the world is extremely high, and with the continuing rise of social media usage, there is eminent chance of escalation into radicalisation and extremism. The results found in this thesis show the necessity for research into this significant phenomenon; it is important to understand the phenomenon in order to discover methods to combat polarisation, prevent its escalation and stop it becoming a threat to democracy.

Through reviewing the literature in chapter one, this thesis provided relevant information and knowledge needed to understand the research question, by showing that polarisation exhibited on social media is rising, in line with the exponential rate of social media usage. In addition to this, the theoretical literature helped to develop the mechanisms that were vital in answering the research question. Using the 2018 study by Bossetta et al, I identified effective methods to use to gain insights into the dynamics of polarisation, through analysing reactions, shares and comments on Facebook. By doing so, I developed the analytical tools and instruments, and created a methodology for my research, laid out in chapter two. I adjusted the methods used to measure mechanisms in order to fit the modern, online world, and to disaggregate the concept of online polarisation.

Through analysing the data both quantitatively and qualitatively, I identified the presence of attribution of similarity, brokerage, diffusion and boundary formation on both the Leave and Remain Facebook pages. I found that both Leavers and Remainers were situated in their own echo chamber on the campaign pages, thus providing for the presence of attribution of similarity. My approach here had limitations, however. It was not feasible to prove

if users were situated in a filter bubble; access to what individuals viewed on their newsfeeds and an in-depth understanding of how Facebook's algorithm works is necessary to prove this. By analysing the number of reactions, comments and shares on the posts of the Facebook pages, I inferred that they were of a sufficient level to allow for homophilous sorting and new connections between individuals, which are necessary for brokerage and diffusion to be present. The presence of these two mechanisms fed into the final mechanism I analysed, boundary formation. By identifying sources of blame and an 'us versus them' rhetoric, I showed that both Leavers and Remainers created out-groups, highlighting their own identity through selective exposure and the formation of boundaries.

Building on Bossetta et al's study also helped to identify the presence of boundary formation within Leavers' comments, and therefore provided new insights as it proved their study needed further analysis to look at the qualitative aspect of comments, rather than only the quantitative aspect, as they had done. Analysing Leavers' comments on The Guardian Facebook page, a pro-EU page and therefore outside Leavers' echo chamber, showed that Leavers still created the same out-groups, with similarly hateful language, that they did within their own echo chamber. This proved they did not cross the ideological divide to combat polarisation, but only to continue to incite divisions in society.

Further research is necessary in looking at how online polarisation may affect offline polarisation. In order to complete a more in-depth study than in this thesis, access to the data from deleted Facebook pages would be extremely useful. As mentioned in the results chapter, analysis of more topics other than the main campaign points, as well as analysis of why Leavers created more out-groups than Remainers, would be beneficial. Although research into polarisation online is vital in order to develop methods to combat it, it is also the responsibility of big corporations like Facebook to try to prevent it. New regulations and laws are needed to force them to do so, however governments are not implementing these fast enough; they seem unable to keep up with how quickly technology is developing. If this does not happen soon, polarisation will continue to rise, and societies will become more divided.

Based on my findings, this thesis claims that despite the Brexit referendum intending to unite the country by settling the EU issue, the results showed that the opposite occurred; by identifying mechanisms throughout the Facebook pages, they facilitated the resonance and dissemination of a polarising political division in society online. Twenty years after Negroponte predicted that the internet might lead to greater political polarisation, society is finally beginning to acknowledge the truth of his prediction. With the internet being more accessible to everyone around the world, and with almost 3.5 billion social media users, what was once seen as a force for connecting people is, instead, driving everyone apart.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMBATTING POLARISATION

- **Changing your own consumption of media and social media**: For individuals to try to reduce polarisation and depolarise by themselves, changing the way they consume media and social media is highly recommended, in order to prevent isolating themselves in an echo chamber. 'Following' new individuals, Facebook pages and media outlets with different and opposing views will already begin to change the social media algorithm that keeps one within their own filter bubble. In order to reduce polarisation, individuals must first look at their own actions, what and who they surround themselves with, taking small steps to change this and escape their bubble.

- **Speaking to people with opposing views**: Britain Talks is a project set up in collaboration by The Mirror and the Daily Express, based on My Country Talks[91]. 4,000 people across the UK signed up to join the project, which took place on the third anniversary of the Brexit referendum, 23rd June 2019. Through filling in a questionnaire, each individual was matched with someone who lives locally to them, with opposing views on Brexit, and encouraged to meet up for cup of tea and a chat. The idea behind this came as 'Brexit divided the country and caused us to forget how to listen to each other'.[92] With an aim to escape their social bubbles, The Mirror reported on the meet up, saying that 'Britain stopped shouting and started listening yesterday…it left them keen to chat again'.[93] This project shows the need for speaking to people with opposing views as it helps individuals, as well as the country, to confront divisions.

- **Dare to be Grey intervention methods**: Dare to be Grey aims to put a stop to the polarisation that is dividing societies. They do so through online campaigns, teaching and training, challenging opinions and telling personal stories from individuals throughout Europe. Through their methods, they are trying to tackle the extreme 'us versus them' narrative, in order to instead find the 'Grey Middle Ground'. Following the Dare to be Grey campaigns online can help identify more ways to reduce polarisation.[94]

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[91] Find more about My Country Talks at https://www.mycountrytalks.org/

[92] Ros Wynne Jones, 'Brexit has divided our country – join Britain Talks to get us back together' (19 April 2019) The Mirror <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/brexit-divided-country-join-britain-14364979> accessed 8 July 2019

[93] Ros Wynne Jones, 'Mirror readers share Brexit views on third anniversary of EU referendum' (24 June 2019) The Mirror <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/mirror-readers-share-brexit-views-16929904> accessed 8 July 2019

[94] Find more on the Dare to be Grey Facebook pages, or at their website https://www.daretobegrey.com

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