Northern Ireland Identity Dynamics in the Aftermath of the Brexit Referendum: A Thematic Exploration of Opinion Newspaper Articles

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Abstract:

Northern Ireland's relatively recent history as a state has been marked by decades of ethnonational conflict, euphemised as "The Troubles." While the signing of the Good Friday Agreement marked the beginning of a period of relative peace and stability, the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union has raised concerns that this peace will be threatened. Academic analysis of society and conflict in Northern Ireland has typically been predicated on the assumption that its identity landscape consists of two distinct ethnonational groups: Irish/Nationalist/Catholics and British/Unionist/Protestants. However, I contend that identities are fluid and continually re-constructed depending on societal and cultural changes. This thesis, therefore, explores how the Brexit referendum influenced identity dynamics in Northern Ireland. This is achieved through a qualitative thematic analysis of opinion newspaper articles in the post-Brexit referendum period from the two most popular regional newspapers in Northern Ireland, the *Irish News* and the *Belfast Telegraph*. This thesis evaluates whether discussions in these articles contain evidence of the continued relevance of ethnonational identities and whether hybrid identities are emerging in the region. The resulting themes indicate that hybrid identification has not emerged among contributors during this period. However, contributors appear increasingly frustrated with the enduring relevance of ethnonationalism in Northern Ireland, particularly within their government.

Table of Contents:

List of Abbreviations:

DUP: Democratic Unionist Party

EU: European Union

GFA: Good Friday Agreement

IRA: Irish Republican Army

NI: Northern Ireland

NIO: Northern Ireland Office

RHI: Renewable Heat Incentive

ROI: Republic of Ireland

RUC: Royal Ulster Constabulary

SDLP: Social Democratic and Labour Party

SF: Sinn Féin

SIT: Social Identity Theory

UDA: Ulster Defence Association

UDR: Ulster Defence Regiment

UK: United Kingdom

UVF: Ulster Volunteer Force

1. Introduction:

1.1. Context:

The Troubles and the Good Friday Agreement (GFA):

The relatively recent history of Northern Ireland (NI) as a state has been marked by decades of ethnonational conflict, commonly referred to by the euphemism of "The Troubles." This period of violence and political unrest, spanning from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, is usually understood as having pitted nationalist (predominantly Catholic) and unionist (predominantly Protestant) communities against each other.[1] Nationalists asserted NI's Irish identity and advocated for a united Ireland, while unionists maintained that NI was British and should remain part of the United Kingdom (UK). While political, ethnic and social identities have long been interconnected in the region (which will be explored in the Theoretical Framework), groups' organisation along ethnonational lines during the Troubles was considered to solidify these ethnonational identity categories, and "radicalis[ed] their repertoires of contention."[2]

The GFA was a peace accord signed in 1998 after years of multilateral negotiation.[3] This agreement aimed to put an end to the fighting by including provisions for a devolved power-sharing government representing both nationalists and unionists (The NI Assembly, commonly referred to as "Stormont"); the protection of self-determination for all citizens; a demilitarisation of the region; a scaling back of the British Army's presence; and a consensus-based procedure wherein NI would only leave the UK if the people of NI voted to do so in a referendum.[4] The signing of the GFA marked a significant milestone in NI's history, bringing in a period of relative peace and stability.[5] However, challenges remain in

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[1] Borsuk, Imren. "From War to Peace: NI Conflict and the Peace Process." *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 13, no. 50 (2016): 42.

[2] Bosi, Lorenzo, and Gianluca De Fazio. "1 Contextualizing the Troubles." *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements* (2017): 13.

[3] Fearon, Kate, and Monica McWilliams. "The Good Friday agreement: A triumph of substance over style." *Fordham Int'l LJ* 22 (1998): 1250.

[4] Ahern, An Taoiseach Bertie. "The Good Friday Agreement: An Overview'(1999)." *Fordham International Law Journal* 22: 1196-1199.

[5] Sabolíková, Karin. "The Vulnerability of the Good Friday Agreement in Light of Brexit": *SKASE Journal of Theoretical Linguistics:* 18

implementing and sustaining the agreement's provisions, particularly in addressing unresolved issues such as the Troubles' legacy and NI's future constitutional status.

Brexit and NI:

In a nationwide referendum, 51.9% of the UK electorate voted to leave the European Union (EU) in an event commonly referred to as "Brexit".[6] The impact of Brexit has been far-reaching, affecting trade, immigration, and security in the UK.[7] Importantly, it has also reignited debates about national identity and sovereignty, particularly in regions like NI and Scotland, where there were majorities in favour of remaining in the EU at 56% and 62% respectively.[8] This presents specific risks for NI, where the complex interplay between peace and identity that has achieved a relative level of stability since the GFA could be threatened by questions inevitably raised by Brexit. One such question is how to maintain equal rights for Irish and British citizens as provisioned by the GFA, given that the former will remain EU citizens and the latter will not. Additionally, there is the pressing issue of where the border should be placed and how it will operate now that the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and NI will no longer both be part of the single market.

1.2. Research aim and questions:

As described, the Troubles have typically been understood as having been rooted in ethnonational conflict between predominantly Catholic/Nationalist/Irish and Protestant/Unionist/British communities. While provisions for equality among these groups and power-sharing enshrined in the GFA led to a relative level of peace, they did not necessarily lead to a discarding of ethnonational identification, as will be explored in the Literature Review. This research aims to evaluate the extent to which these conceptualisations of identity are still relevant in contemporary media, and whether any alternative identity categorisations have emerged. Furthermore, this research investigates whether newspaper contributors believe Brexit has impacted these identity dynamics.

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[6] Adam, Rudolf G. "Brexit and No End." *Brexit: Causes and Consequences* (2020): 116.

[7] Erken, Hugo, Raphie Hayat, Carlijn Prins, Marijn Heijmerikx, and Inge de Vreede. "Measuring the permanent costs of Brexit." *National Institute Economic Review* 244 (2018): 46.

[8] Whiteley, Paul, Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Marianne C. Stewart. "Welcome to Brexit Britain." Chapter. In *Brexit Britain: The Consequences of the Vote to Leave the European Union*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023): 3-23.

To explore these topics, I will employ a qualitative thematic analysis of opinion articles from the two most popular regional newspapers in NI in the post-Brexit referendum period. Gaining a deeper understanding of the implications of transformative events like Brexit for NI can not only shape understandings of the potential ramifications of a similar event in the region, but also inform speculation of how such events could impact other post-conflict regions, especially those whose conflict also had an ethnonational dimension.

Therefore, the key research questions are as follows:

1. How has the Brexit referendum influenced discussions in NI newspapers surrounding national identity in NI and its relationship to the rest of the UK?
2. How do these discussions reflect the persistence of ethnonational identities or the emergence of hybrid identities in NI during the post-Brexit referendum period?

1.3. Structure:

Chapter Two establishes the Theoretical and Conceptual Framework, integrating Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" theory with Ethnonationalism, Ethno-symbolism, and SIT (Social Identity Theory), describing how these shape the coding process and analysis of articles. This framework also explores theories pertaining to hybrid identity, outlining its conceptualisation within civic and European identity categories in NI and detailing these concepts' roles in shaping the methodology and analysis. Chapter Three synthesises existing literature on NI identity dynamics in the post-GFA and post-Brexit referendum periods, identifying research gaps and situating this thesis within this body of research. Chapter Four details the methodological approach, discussing the methodological considerations behind employing a qualitative thematic analysis on opinion newspaper articles, addressing limitations, and establishing the framework for the method. Chapter Five presents the results of the thematic analysis, discussing them in relation to the Theoretical and Conceptual Framework, contextualising them among existing scholarship, and discussing their relevance to the research questions. Finally, Chapter Six synthesises the results and discussions and suggests avenues for future research.

2.   Theoretical and Conceptual Framework:

This section elaborates on the theories and concepts underpinning this study. I explain my understanding of them in relation to this study's research aim and the ways in which they concretely shaped my methodology and analysis.

2.1. Imagined Communities:

Benedict Anderson proposes that nations and nationalism are not natural or primordial entities but are instead imagined and constructed by their members.[9] These imagined communities are characterised by a sense of collective identity, belonging, and an understanding of a shared past and future.[10] While "the fellow members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them," it is this belief of having a common sense of affiliation and community among members which nonetheless constructs a nation.[11] This theory acts as a backdrop for interpreting my dataset, shaping my understanding of how national identities are constructed. Two theories I have used in conjunction with this theory are ethnonationalism and ethno-symbolism. While ethnonationalism can be viewed as a variety of "Imagined Communities," ethno-symbolism is a way in which an "Imagined Community" can be constructed and identified.

2.2. Ethnonationalism:

Ethnonationalism is a concept founded on the belief that a nation is a self-conscious cultural and ethnic community rather than just a political community.[12] Like Anderson, this concept understands nationalism as being socially-constructed, specifically along ethnic and cultural lines. Ethnonationalism has often been used as the default frame for analysing conflict in NI, with narratives surrounding NI in academia often presupposing that national, ethnic, cultural, and religious identities are closely interconnected.[13] Nationalist identities are frequently conflated with Catholicism and Irish nationality, while unionist identities are frequently

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[9] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. Revised Edition.* (Verso, 2006): 6.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Connor, Walker. "The politics of ethnonationalism." *Journal of International affairs* (1973): 3.
[13] McGrattan, Cillian. "Explaining Northern Ireland? The Limitations of the Ethnic Conflict Model." *National Identities* 12, no. 2 (June 2010): 186.

conflated with Protestantism and British nationality.[14] In this research, I will be looking for evidence of contributors asserting that there is this interconnection of identities in order to test the relevance of ethnonationalism to them. According to Imagined Communities, communities are constructed based on a sense of common identity, belonging, and a shared past and future. Therefore, I will code any evidence of common identities, belonging, and shared pasts and futures conceptualised along Nationalist/Catholic/Irish and Unionist/Protestant/British ethnonational lines. The next concept of "ethno-symbolism" will help me flag any evidence of this during the coding process.

2.3. Ethno-symbolism:

Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolic approach emphasises the importance of symbols, traditions, and rituals in constructing and maintaining national identities.[15] Ethno-symbolism plays a central role in articulating and reinforcing ethnonational identity in NI with symbols and rituals such as the Irish tricolour, Orange Order marches, bonfires, and sectarian murals carrying deep historical and cultural significance for Nationalist/Irish/Catholic and Unionist/British/Protestant communities.[16] Smith emphasises the importance of these symbols in the "rites and ceremonies of public culture," describing them as aiding in creating collective national identities.[17] Smith, like Anderson, also elaborates on the importance of a perceived shared history and ancestry in community formation, which are said to provide "intimations of belonging in one family."[18] In NI, both Nationalist/Catholic/Irish and Unionist/Protestant/British communities often perceive themselves as part of distinct historical narratives, marked by centuries of conflict, conquest, and resistance.[19] These narratives contribute to a sense of common affiliation and collective destiny, reinforcing ethnonational identities and ethnonational group cohesion.

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Smith, Anthony D. *Ethno-symbolism and nationalism: A cultural approach*. (Routledge, 2009), 25.

[16] For in-depth studies of the importance of ethnonational rituals in NI, see, for example: Blake, Jonathan S. *Contentious Rituals: Parading the Nation in Northern Ireland*. Oxford University Press, 2019; Crowley, Tony. "Reading Republican Murals in Northern Ireland: Archiving and Meaning-Making." *Studi Irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* 12, no. 12 (2022): 87-117.

[17] Smith, Anthony D. *Ethno-symbolism and nationalism: A cultural approach*. (Routledge, 2009), 25.

[18] Smith, Anthony D. "Ethnic myths and ethnic revivals." *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 25, no. 2 (1984): 284-285.

[19] McAuley, James W. *Collective Memory and Political Identity in Northern Ireland* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2024), 11.

In line with Imagined Communities and Ethno-symbolism, this research prioritises the identification of identity markers along ethnonational lines during the coding process. Particularly, I will code any instances where Unionist/Protestant/British and Nationalist/Catholic/Irish people are considered to have distinct shared pasts and futures. I will also code for any instances of ethno-symbols such as Unionist/Protestant/British or Nationalist/Catholic/Irish rituals or traditions. When discussing such instances, these theories will shape my understanding of their role in constructing ethnonational conceptualisations of identity.

2.4. Social Identity Theory (SIT):

Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, SIT provides a framework for understanding the establishment and maintenance of group identities, as well as the conditions necessary for intergroup conflict to occur. They suggest that individuals tend to categorise themselves and others into distinct groups.[20] This categorisation is based on a shared perception of being in the same social category, where the group achieves a level of consensus about what their group and membership in it means, and members are emotionally involved in how it is conceptualised.[21] Once categorised, individuals seek to maintain positive social identity through in-group/out-group comparison. This allows an individual to improve their self-esteem if they have internalised their group membership "as an aspect of their self-concept" by making favourable comparisons between their social in-group and relevant out-group.[22] Tajfel and Turner contend that these conditions are already sufficient for intergroup social competition to occur.[23]

SIT provides insight into the mechanisms through which individuals in NI can be seen as categorising themselves and others into identity categories and maintaining them, as well as how these processes may contain the conditions necessary for intergroup conflict. Methodologically, this theory will shape the coding process. Evidence of in-group favouritism and out-group derogation will be coded as important processes of group identity formation and maintenance and as conditions making antagonistic intergroup relations likely.

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[20] Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior." In *Political psychology*, (Psychology Press, 2004), 283.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 283-284.
[23] Ibid., 284.

2.5. Hybrid Identity:

Scholars have suggested that SIT can lead to an overly static and concrete view of identity.[24] Furthermore, the sole use of Imagined Communities and ethno-symbolism in tandem with ethnonationalism may lead to an overly simplistic understanding of how national identities can be formed, heavily relying on criteria such as shared pasts and historical traditions. Such understandings of the nation can lead to deterministic conceptions of identity in NI, presupposing that, based on historical shared practices and events, ethnonational categorisation is the logical outcome for identity dynamics in NI. To avoid overreliance on this assumption, this research will be complemented with theories emphasising the hybrid and fluid nature of identity.

Theorists such as Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha share this notion, contending that identities are neither predetermined nor fixed. Hall argues that identities are continually constructed and re-constructed through processes of discourse and representation, with factors such as cultural narratives, media representations, and power dynamics shaping how individuals understand their identity.[25] Bhabha also understands identity as inherently unstable, being constantly renegotiated and redefined based on cultural influences and experiences.[26] This understanding of identity shapes my research by acknowledging the dynamic nature of identity construction and avoiding assuming that ethnonationalist identity is natural and unchangeable in NI. Instead, I understand the Brexit referendum as an event that dramatically alters the cultural context, potentially having implications for people in NI's conceptualisations of their identities. Therefore, I will actively look out for any evidence of changes to or re-constructing of identities in NI in my dataset, as well as for evidence of specific cultural changes which could lead to a renegotiation of identity.

Two concepts which will help me to identify evidence of hybrid identity are Europeanisation and Civic Nationalism.

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[24] Hornsey, Matthew J. "Social identity theory and self-categorization theory: A historical review." *Social and personality psychology compass* 2, no. 1 (2008): 217.
[25] Hall, Stuart, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity," in *Questions of cultural identity,* ed. Grossberg, Lawrence, Stuart Hall, and Paul Du Gay (SAGE Publications, 1996): 6.
[26] Bhabha, Homi K. *The location of culture*. (Routledge, 2012): 1-3.

2.6. Europeanisation:

Europeanisation is used to describe the process of European integration among EU states.[27] In NI, Europeanisation's key impact on identity dynamics has been its potential of fostering a new, shared identity as EU citizens. The EU has therefore often been framed as a catalyst for the development of a shared, superordinate identity that supersedes ethnonational affiliations.[28] This concept also aligns with Anderson's notion of a shared future as having the potential to promote cohesion among disparate individuals. In this context, the EU provides a framework of common membership wherein both Ireland and the UK were "headed in the same direction, especially in areas that relate to cross-border movement."[29] Following Anderson's logic, the EU's ability to provide disparate individuals with the idea of a shared future can reinforce a superordinate European identity rather than ethnonational ones. Meanwhile, leaving the EU is a large cultural shift that could reshape how people in NI imagine their future. As described by Hall and Bhabha, such shifts have the potential to act as catalysts for the re-evaluation and redefinition of identities.

Europeanisation will guide the interpretation of my data set, providing context surrounding the ways in which being part of the EU impacted identity dynamics in NI, and therefore the potential impact leaving the EU may have upon these identity dynamics.

2.7. Civic Nationalism:

Civic nationalism offers another path for fostering a shared identity for people in NI, diverging from the ethnonationalist categories by emphasising nationhood based on allegiance to a nation-state instead of shared cultural, ethnic, or religious ties.[30] In NI, this form of nationalism is often conceptualised via the "Northern Irish" identity category which has emerged relatively recently.[31] This term arguably provides an alternative, civic-oriented

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[27] Börzel, Tanya and Diana Panke, "Europeanization," in *European Union Politics*, ed. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford University Press, 2020).
[28] Curtis, K. Amber. "European identity's effect on immigration attitudes: Testing the predictions of the common Ingroup identity model versus ingroup projection model." *Political Psychology* (2024): 2.
[29] Hayward, Katy, and Mary C. Murphy. "The EU's influence on the peace process and agreement in Northern Ireland in light of Brexit." In *Beyond the Good Friday Agreement*, Routledge, 2020: 276.
[30] Dempsey, Kara E. "Fostering grassroots civic nationalism in an ethno-nationally divided community in Northern Ireland." *Geopolitics* 27, no. 1 (2022): 293-294.
[31] McNicholl, Kevin, Clifford Stevenson, and John Garry. "How the "Northern Irish" national identity is understood and used by young people and politicians." *Political Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2019): 488; 494.

identity for individuals in NI who prefer not to identify along ethnonational lines.[32] Its emergence and success in functioning as a shared identity category will be explored in detail in the Literature Review. In relation to Imagined Communities, Anderson's emphasis on the importance of rituals and symbols in fostering identity categories is relevant. This is given the fact that the recently emerged "Northern Irish" identity lacks the deeply entrenched symbols and rituals of older identity constructs. Hence, this research's methodology will seek to identify any potential emerging shared symbols and rituals that could bolster its status as a genuine shared identity category encapsulating what it means to be a member of society in NI beyond ethnonational terms.

3. Literature review:

3.1. Post-GFA identity dynamics:

Many scholars have attempted to track NI identity dynamics since the establishment of the GFA. McLaughlin et al. did this through comparative analysis of survey data. Following the GFA, they observed a shift in Protestant self-categorisation away from Irish affiliation, while Catholics predominantly maintained their Irish identification.[33] They also noted an upwards trend of Catholics identifying as Irish over time, as well as an upwards trend of Protestants identifying as British over time.[34] In conjunction with this survey data, they also integrated results from in-depth interviews with young people and adults, which also highlighted the continued salience of these ethnonational identity categories among participants.[35]

While McLaughlin et al.'s research was published in 2007, more recent studies have indicated the continued relevance of ethnonational categorisation in NI. For example, this continued relevance was demonstrated by Dempsey's study on identity dynamics in NI, published in 2020. She found that, despite the cross-community building efforts that followed the GFA, NI remains strongly divided along ethnonational lines, with ethnonational identity reinforced by "physical separation" and "residential segregation".[36] She also notes the

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[32] Dempsey, Kara E. "Fostering grassroots civic nationalism in an ethno-nationally divided community in Northern Ireland." *Geopolitics* 27, no. 1 (2022): 301-302.

[33] Muldoon, Orla T., Karen Trew, Jennifer Todd, Nathalie Rougier, and Katrina McLaughlin. "Religious and national identity after the Belfast Good Friday Agreement." *Political Psychology* 28, no. 1 (2007): 90-91.

[34] Ibid., 90-91.

[35] Ibid., 99-100.

[36] Dempsey, Kara E. "Fostering grassroots civic nationalism in an ethno-nationally divided community in Northern Ireland." *Geopolitics* 27, no. 1 (2022): 293.

importance of ethno-symbols such as parades and sectarian political murals in reinforcing these ethnonational identifications.[37] These symbols are presented as evidence that ethnonational identification is still very relevant in NI society today.

Dempsey, however, goes on to discuss the potential for mitigating these ethnonational divisions with the use of superordinate goals.[38] Dempsey tests this theory through analysis of a community centre situated in a "highly segregated area of Belfast" named the 174 Trust.[39] By promoting shared activities and common goals amongst members of both ethnonationalist communities, such as support groups for addiction as well as parenting groups for parents with disabled children, Dempsey argues a new form of civic nationalism can be fostered which is not grounded in ethnonational affiliation.[40] This grassroots approach, which focused on superordinate goals and intergroup interaction, underscores the potential for local initiatives to bridge ethnonational divides and promote reconciliation in post-conflict NI.

EU peace funding has historically played an important role in initiatives like these, with NI having been seen as a "priority region for EU structural assistance."[41] For example, the PEACE Program provided financial support for peace initiatives in NI.[42] Importantly, cross-community projects receiving this funding were "rooted in local and regional partnership agreements," demonstrating the importance of EU funding on the ground and how it can affect identity.[43] Therefore, this thesis looked out for discussions about funding in the dataset and considers any implications on identity. Furthermore, while Dempsey provides one clear case study for superordinate goals and civic nationalism, by analysing opinion newspaper articles which include submissions from readers, this research can investigate the extent to which this form of nationalism has permeated wider society.

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Sherif defines superordinate goals as "goals which are compelling and highly appealing to members of two or more groups in conflict but which cannot be attained by the resources and energies of the groups separately." See: Sherif, Muzafer. "Superordinate goals in the reduction of intergroup conflict." *American journal of Sociology* 63, no. 4 (1958): 349-350.

[39] Dempsey, Kara E. "Fostering grassroots civic nationalism in an ethno-nationally divided community in Northern Ireland." *Geopolitics* 27, no. 1 (2022): 293.

[40] Ibid., 301-302.

[41] Hayward, Katy, and Mary C. Murphy. "The EU's influence on the peace process and agreement in Northern Ireland in light of Brexit." In *Beyond the Good Friday Agreement*, Routledge, 2020: 279.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., 279-280.

There is also a body of research tackling this emergence of a civic identity outside of this specific case study. This research typically analyses the use of the "Northern Irish" identity category as an emerging civic or hybrid identity within NI. McNicholl et al. consider this category to have emerged relatively recently, and note it is especially evident among younger generations for whom sectarian identity is "less relevant."[44] They note that this category has increased in popularity over time, with approximately one quarter of residents preferring to identify as Northern Irish.[45] Importantly, they note that the proportion of Catholics and Protestants identifying as Northern Irish is equal, demonstrating its potential as a civic label.[46] Furey et al. consider the appeal of this identity and its proportionate use between Protestants and Catholics to be due in part to its "perceived inclusivity" of multiple social categories and the association it has with greater levels of intergroup conflict and conciliatory attitudes.[47] However, despite its potential as a civic identity, there are limitations to this understanding, with McNicholl et al. finding that the prototypical Northern Irish identifier is more likely to be perceived as a Protestant, revealing the potential for this identity to become a subordinate one under a dominant superordinate group as opposed to a truly inclusive one.[48]

This bias is also discussed by Jonathan Tonge and Raul Gomez. Using a mixed-methods study drawing from party documents, press statements, survey data, and census data, they find that the development of a cross-community Northern Irish identity remains limited.[49] Where it is evident, there is an overrepresentation of non-religious individuals and educated young Protestants adopting this label, while Catholics, regardless of age, demonstrate reluctance to embrace "Northern Irish" as an identity category.[50] The authors also note the fragility of this identity label, describing how British and Irish identities can be reverted to in certain contexts, such as disputes over the flying of national flags.[51] Tonge and Gomez conclude that the evolution of identity dynamics since the GFA has not resulted in the flourishing of a new, hybrid Northern Irish identity, with British and Irish identities

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[44] McNicholl, Kevin, Clifford Stevenson, and John Garry. "How the "Northern Irish" national identity is understood and used by young people and politicians." *Political Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2019): 488.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 490.
[48] Ibid., 502.
[49] Tonge, Jonathan, and Raul Gomez. "Shared identity and the end of conflict? How far has a common sense of 'Northern Irishness' replaced British or Irish allegiances since the 1998 Good Friday agreement?." *Irish Political Studies* 30, no. 2 (2015): 294.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

persisting.[52] Instead, changes are limited to how these British and Irish identities are expressed, with "the more contentious history and myth" associated with them being increasingly downplayed by these communities.

The complexity of this identity category is also explored by McNicholl et al., whose study into its use among young people and politicians in NI demonstrates the breadth of interpretations of its utilisation and meaning. While young people were found to typically understand it as a means of transcending ethnonational divide and embracing a shared sense of belonging as well as centrist politicians who see it as a way of promoting a "shared future," other groups deviate from this understanding.[53] For example, Sinn Féin (SF) members were found to view the label with scepticism, understanding it as "disingenuous" and as "undermin[ing] Irishness in the north."[54] The complexity and lack of consensus on this category is also examined by Katy Hayward and Cathal McManus, who investigate why the largest portion of people in NI do not identify themselves using unionist or nationalist labels, but as "Neither," despite trends of highly polarised election results in NI which would imply this was not the case.[55] Based on analysis of survey data since 2006, they conclude that while the GFA created conditions for people to identify in a "Neither" category, it has not successfully fostered an environment wherein people push for politics representing a "third way" outside of ethnonational politics, nor a third category of identification such as "Northern Irish."[56] This study thus shows the limitations experienced so far in people embracing this as a cross-community category.

This scholarship analysing identity dynamics in the post-GFA period and how the GFA affected these shapes my interpretation of this study's data set. These studies describe the nature of identity dynamics in NI post-GFA but pre-Brexit referendum, providing a contextual groundwork for my analysis of the post-Brexit referendum period. Furthermore, it details the successes and limitations such a monumental agreement faced in re-shaping identities in NI. Therefore, this scholarship provides insight into the nature of identity in NI and its susceptibility to change in response to transformative events such as the GFA. As

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[52] Ibid.
[53] McNicholl, Kevin, Clifford Stevenson, and John Garry. "How the "Northern Irish" national identity is understood and used by young people and politicians." *Political Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2019): 488.
[54] Ibid., 499-500.
[55] Hayward, Katy, and Cathal McManus. "Neither/nor: The rejection of unionist and nationalist identities in post-agreement Northern Ireland." *Capital & Class* 43, no. 1 (2019): 139-141.
[56] Ibid., 139.

such, it informs my understanding of the possibilities and limitations of Brexit in causing substantial change to identity dynamics in NI, therefore shaping how I interpret discussions from contributors about the ramifications of Brexit.

3.2. Post-Brexit identity dynamics:

Another relevant body of scholarship investigates identity dynamics in NI post-Brexit. These studies necessarily rely on less data and a less longitudinal approach than studies on the post-GFA period, yet provide interesting insights into responses to Brexit and speculation of its long-term implications.

Cathy Gormley-Heenan and Arthur Aughey describe the various dimensions of Brexit's impact on NI, discussing how it may affect identity, politics, and the constitution. They argue that, preceding Brexit, the border between NI and the ROI was perceived as "soft", and this symbolised improved relations and peace.[57] They go on to emphasise the significance of what they label "the border in the mind," based on Beckett's 1966 conclusion that the "real border in Ireland is not on the map 'but in the minds of men'".[58] While this border was increasingly depoliticised due to various developments such as the GFA and Europeanisation, Brexit has brought the border question back into focus, provoking debates about its nature and location.[59] Gormley-Heenan and Aughey describe this impact as significant, noting how Brexit has disordered nationalist expectations and sparked a renewed interest in Irish unity.[60] Meanwhile, unionists are generally observed to be using Brexit as an opportunity to assert British identity and sovereignty.[61] The authors observe that opinions on Brexit are largely divided along party lines. The main nationalist parties, Sinn Féin (SF) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) supported Remain, while the main unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), supported Leave.[62] This emphasises the interplay between political parties and ethnonational split in NI.

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[57] In this context, "soft" refers to a border which is "hardly discernible" and which has "freedom of movement across it," as was the case for the border between NI and the ROI pre-Brexit.
See: Gormley-Heenan, Cathy, and Arthur Aughey. "Northern Ireland and Brexit: Three effects on 'the border in the mind'." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2017): 499.
[58] Gormley-Heenan, Cathy, and Arthur Aughey. "Northern Ireland and Brexit: Three effects on 'the border in the mind'." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2017): 500.
[59] Ibid., 498.
[60] Ibid., 503-504.
[61] Ibid., 505.
[62] Ibid., 504.

Nicholas Wright's 2018 book chapter "Brexit and Ireland: Collateral damage?" similarly tackles the border question, alongside the strain that Brexit may put on Anglo-Irish relations and the potential risks to NI's peace process. Wright speculates on the likelihood of a hard border being re-implemented in-between NI and the ROI, and what its implications would be for NI's trade and Anglo-Irish intergovernmental relations.[63] Interestingly, he also speculates that NI may be used "for leverage" in UK negotiations with the EU through the assertion that, without a "special arrangement" in trading agreements that the UK sought, NI's peace process would be impacted.[64] While this type of speculative study is certainly valuable and can outline the important topics and questions at the forefront of this event, the rapid developments of the border debate since its publication in 2018 has rendered it arguably dated.

Therefore, this research has opted to focus on a specific timeframe, capturing the prevailing concerns of that period rather than speculating on future outcomes and the accompanying concerns. Nonetheless, Wright's chapter provides a comprehensive overview of key concerns emerging in the post-Brexit period, including speculation about the different types of border which could be created as a result of post-Brexit upheaval. My research will draw on this overview to examine whether debates about the border represent a clear topic of discussion in the dataset, and the nature of any discussion surrounding it. I will also examine if there is any evidence that contributors feel the UK is using concerns around NI's peace process for leverage in negotiations with the EU, considering what the implications of such a perception could be.

Driscoll also reviewed the potential implications of Brexit at a relatively early stage in 2019, but from a legal perspective. She discusses how Brexit, in most envisioned forms, will inevitably lead to a breach of the GFA's provision of "equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of each community."[65] This breach arises from the discrepancy in the retention of EU rights post-Brexit.[66] While British citizens in NI would lose these rights, Irish

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[63] Wright, Nicholas. "Brexit and Ireland: Collateral Damage?" In *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe,* edited by Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger (UCL Press, 2018): 106.
[64] Ibid., 113.
[65] Driscoll, Elizabeth E. "Equal Treatment for the Identity: The Inequality of Irish and British Citizenship in Post-Brexit Northern Ireland." *BU Int'l LJ* 37 (2019): 227.
[66] Ibid., 211.

citizens would retain them.[67] Such an imbalance violates the GFA's promise of "equal economic opportunity," as British citizens would lose access to EU rights such as freedom of movement, putting them at a disadvantage versus their Irish counterparts in accessing work opportunities across the EU.[68] Stevenson explains the political implications of these breaches, describing how SF use this as an opportunity to promote a border poll in NI on the basis of this "undercut[ting of] a fundamental premise of the Belfast Agreement".[69] So, while Driscoll's study highlights the complex legal ramifications of Brexit for NI and its peace process, Stevenson considers the political and social ramifications of these breaches.

Stevenson goes on to argue that Brexit may not only lead to SF to heighten calls for a border poll, but may also lead to a resurgence of nationalist violence in the region.[70] He speculates that, if a border referendum was not scheduled prior to a potential hard Brexit, then "dissident violence" could emerge as a method of putting pressure on the British and Irish governments to support a poll.[71][72] He also considers that the Conservative Party's interest in maintaining a united UK could lead to increased resentment among nationalists and increase the likelihood of violence among nationalist groups.[73] However, other scholars, such as Savaric, are critical of these speculations of upsurging nationalist violence on the basis that they rely on the assumption that, if SF did not "get its way, the IRA [would] revert back to an armed campaign."[74] Savaric argues that the IRA is not necessarily capable of doing so at this time.[75] He suggests that more attention should be placed on unionist groups, who may be feeling a sense of insecurity within the UK as a result of Brexit, highlighting the increased violent activity from unionist paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).[76] Therefore, this research will investigate the potential for both unionist and nationalist resurgence of violence, without presuming a higher likelihood of either.

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Stevenson, Jonathan. "Does Brexit Threaten Peace in Northern Ireland?." *Survival* 59, no. 3 (2017): 120.
[70] Stevenson, Jonathan. "Does Brexit Threaten Peace in Northern Ireland?." *Survival* 59, no. 3 (2017): 123.
[71] A "hard" Brexit refers to a process where the UK would leave the EU's Single Market and only trade according to World Trade Organisation Rules. Meanwhile, a "soft" Brexit would lead to the retention of a close relationship with the Single Market, in a relationship similar to the one Norway has with it. See: Van Reenen, John. "Brexit's long-run effects on the UK economy." *Brookings papers on economic activity* (2016): 367.
[72] Stevenson, Jonathan. "Does Brexit Threaten Peace in Northern Ireland?." *Survival* 59, no. 3 (2017): 123.
[73] Ibid., 124.
[74] Savaric, Michel. "Northern Ireland: Is the Peace Process Really Under Threat?." *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique. French Journal of British Studies* 23, no. XXIII-2 (2018): 19.
[75] Ibid., 13.
[76] Ibid.

4. Methodology:

This section provides an overview of the research design employed in this study, outlining the underlying assumptions that guide it, as well as addressing any limitations.

4.1. Research Approach:

This study primarily employs a qualitative thematic analysis of opinion newspaper articles in the post-referendum period. Braun and Clarke outline a clear six-step framework for conducting this method in their 2006 guide to thematic analysis, which they expanded on in greater detail in their recent 2021 updated guide.[77] These guides are described as being made to provide an "accessible and robust" qualitative method which, through systematic data coding, can develop themes reflecting "patterns of meaning" in data.[78] This method is grounded in the principle that qualitative studies can capture a greater level of "nuance, complexity and even contradictions" than more positivist, quantitative approaches.[79] Guest et al. support this argument, emphasising the ability of qualitative research to interpret "deeper meaning in discourse and understand multiple realities," as opposed to an "'objective' reality."[80] My research aim is not to represent a large dataset with a tidy answer, but rather to offer a nuanced, in-depth exploration of identity dynamics at a specific moment in time. Therefore, it is the flexible and nuanced nature of thematic analysis which I believe makes it most suitable for my research aims.

As noted by Guest et al., these qualities of thematic analysis can also raise concerns regarding reliability of results.[81] To address this, Braun and Clarke's six-step method outlined in their 2021 guide will be followed to ensure a thorough explanation of theme development can be provided, thus facilitating the replication of similar studies. This will be elaborated on in section "4.4. Procedure".

This data is enriched through the integration of Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) 2016 survey data. The NILT survey was launched in 1998 and investigates "the attitudes, values

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[77] Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (SAGE Publications, 2021).
[78] Ibid., 79-81.
[79] Ibid., 91.
[80] Guest, Gregory, Kathleen M. MacQueen, and Emily E. Namey. "Introduction to applied thematic analysis." *Applied thematic analysis* 3, no. 20 (2012): 13.
[81] Ibid., 9.

and beliefs of the people in NI on a wide range of social policy issues."[82] These surveys are funded by various organisations each year, and the results are freely available for anybody to use.[83] Although this is, therefore, technically a mixed-methods study, it is crucial to note that this research is firmly grounded in a qualitative and interpretative methodology, with no statistical analysis applied to either the newspaper articles or survey data. Rather, the survey data is used as a means of enhancing the primary findings from the thematic analysis, offering potential corroboration or contradiction where possible.

4.2. Data Rationale:

The dataset for this research is drawn from the two most popular regional newspapers in NI, the *Irish News* and the *Belfast Telegraph*.[84] Daily newspaper articles have been selected due to their ability to reflect public discourse and offer insights into immediate reactions to the referendum and discussions surrounding identity topics. Opinion articles provide particularly useful data for this research problem. This is because they tend to convey emotive responses, personal reflections, and lived experiences which are particularly relevant for exploring questions surrounding identity and belonging. Furthermore, the "Opinion" category for both newspapers includes "Letters to the Editor." These are letters sent into the newspaper from readers, and can therefore reveal perceptions among a wider range of people in NI rather than just from journalists or columnists. However, it is important to note that editors decide which letters are published, giving them a level of control over the portrayal of public opinion.[85] Nonetheless, "Letters to the Editor" provide insight into the content which editors deem acceptable to be included in their publication, which can indicate the positioning of each newspaper on certain topics and could, therefore, prove useful to my research aim.

Both newspapers selected have different ethnonational ties. The *Irish News* was founded in 1891 due to the involvement of "one of the great figures in Irish Nationalism," Charles

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[82] ARK, "What is the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey?", ark.ac.uk, accessed January 13, 2024, https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/nilt/about

[83] ARK, "Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey – Funders," ark.ac.uk, accessed March 3, 2024, https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/nilt/about/funders.html

[84] Ofcom, "News Consumption Survey 2022: Northern Ireland," ofcorm.org.uk, accessed March 13, 2024, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/241932/News-Consumption-Survey-2022-Northern-Ireland.pdf

[85] Foster, H. Schuyler, and Carl J. Friedrich. "Letters to the Editor as a Means of Measuring the Effectiveness of Propaganda1." *American Political Science Review* 31, no. 1 (1937): 73.

Stewart Parnell, demonstrating its historical link to Irish Nationalism.[86] The *Irish News* has also been described by one of its own columnists as the "voice of the northern nationalist people," which people "turn to in order to find out the opinions of nationalist thinkers, writers, and politicians."[87] Meanwhile, the *Belfast Telegraph* was established in 1870 as a unionist newspaper.[88] Aside from historical roots in unionism, scholars contend that it has continued to be considered to represent "unionist political interests" and has been "favoured by the Protestant population," indicating that the *Belfast Telegraph* is still considered to have Unionist/Protestant/British ethnonational ties.[89] Analysing articles from both newspapers allows an evaluation of a broad range of perspectives across society.

However, despite the ethnonational ties these newspapers are considered to have, the articles they publish do not strictly align with ethnonational identities. This is evidenced by the inclusion of articles by journalists of various national, political, and religious backgrounds discussing various opinions which do not align with the foundations of these newspapers. Therefore, while the selection of these newspapers provides access to a broader range of views across society, the analysis of their articles will not assume a strict ethnonational divide exists. Where possible, information surrounding how columnists identify will be collected and used to contextualise their contributions. Avoiding this assumption of ethnonational alignment is particularly important given that it is usually not possible to determine how contributors describe their identities. This is especially when it comes to "Letters to the Editor" contributors, as there is minimal available information about who these contributors are. Therefore, it is not possible to ascertain that views from most contributors represent a "Unionist/Protestant/British" or "Nationalist/Catholic/Irish" perspective and analysis will not presuppose that they do.

Moreover, this research will generally avoid assuming that there is a homogenous "Unionist/Protestant/British" or "Nationalist/Catholic/Irish" perspective, prioritising an exploration of various voices without attempting to tightly bind them into ethnonational categories. Furthermore, this research does not assume that these categories continue to be

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[86] Irish News, "About Us," The Irish News, irishnews.com, accessed March 15, 2024, https://www.irishnews.com/about-us/ "

[87] Ainsworth, Paul. "Revamped Irish news shaped by readers," *Irish News.* September 25, 2013. https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/09/25/news/revamped_irish_news_shaped_by_readers-3643711/

[88] Bairner, Alan. "The media." *Northern Ireland Politics* (1996): 173-180.

[89] Cunningham, Niall. "The Social Geography of Violence During the Belfast Troubles, 1920-22." (2013): 5.

relevant. Rather, the thesis aims to examine whether ethnonational identification continues to be relevant, while also actively looking for ways contributors appear to identify themselves or others outside of ethnonational terms.

An effort to avoid assuming the relevance of ethnonational identification and the existence of a homogenous unionist or nationalist perspective is also an important consideration when utilising the results of the NILT survey. Since the survey findings divide responses into "Protestant" and "Catholic" categories, there is a risk of assuming causality between responses and ethnonational affiliations. To mitigate such assumptions, my analysis first seeks to establish if and how ethnonationalism is relevant to the responses included in the "Opinion" section of these newspapers. In instances where ethnonationalism appears to be relevant, these findings are then corroborated with survey results, which assist in highlighting divergences in views between Catholic and Protestant populations.

4.3. Data Collection:

Opinion articles were collected from December 2016, chosen for its alignment with the final month of fieldwork for the NILT 2016 survey, facilitating a relevant cross-examination of qualitative and quantitative data. This timeframe also coincides with newspapers' traditional end-of-year reflection pieces and letters, offering valuable insight into what journalists and readers deemed the year's key issues. Additionally, the lapse in time since the Brexit referendum allowed for more considered responses, reflecting a deeper understanding of Brexit's implications and unresolved issues.

The chosen timeframe also predates the 2017 breakdown of the power-sharing executive, which occurred following the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scandal.[90] While this scandal is emblematic of Stormont's perceived dysfunction among the public, my aim is to disentangle the impact of Brexit on public and media debate from that of the RHI scandal. By December 2016, several articles from the dataset were already referencing the RHI scandal. While these can offer valuable insight into opinions on Stormont, overrepresentation of RHI-

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[90] The RHI was a scheme implemented in 2012 in NI which aimed to encourage the use of renewable heating options to meet renewable energy targets. The model of this scheme was fundamentally flawed, which ultimately led to a misspending of £400m+ of public money, leading to concerns being raised about the DUP's and Sinn Féin's incompetence at Stormont. See: Rice, Charis, Bernadette Connaughton, Jenny Ratcliffe, and Ian Somerville. "A slow-burning crisis: Executive relations and the normalisation of distrust in Northern Ireland's 'cash for ash' fiasco." *International Review of Administrative Sciences* (2023)

focused articles may hinder a thorough evaluation of lasting opinions on Stormont, power-sharing, and particularly topics surrounding Brexit that were not strongly influenced by frustration over this scandal.

The "Opinion" category of both the *Belfast Telegraph* and the *Irish News* includes columnist-written articles, reader-written letters, and analyses authored by journalists. Throughout 01-12-2016 to 31-12-2016, both newspapers published a similar number of opinion articles featuring the key word "Brexit", with the *Belfast Telegraph* publishing 28 articles and the *Irish News* publishing 32 articles on their online databases respectively. It is important to note that "Letters to the Editor" often incorporate several short letters into one article, which means the number of contributors exceeds the number of articles. Such incorporation is particularly commonplace in the *Irish News*. Therefore, there are a total of 39 contributors to the *Belfast Telegraph* and 75 contributors to the *Irish News*.

Data saturation refers to the point in a research process at which new data presents no or little new information addressing the research question.[91] The arrival at this point can be used as a criterion for ceasing data collection, since more data would not reveal new relevant insights.[92] However, Braun and Clarke argue that striving to reach this goes against the philosophy of thematic analysis, which is not to "excavate" meaning through data nor to make judgements about the quantity of data used.[93] Accordingly, this selection of articles was deemed sufficient for conducting an in-depth analysis of identity topics in opinion articles at this specific time, without seeking to represent any other period or topic.

This is not to say the principles of data saturation were completely disregarded. The PRICE model as described by Naeem et al. explores ways to ensure qualitative analysis results in "meaningful" and "uniform" outcomes, which were considered throughout the research process.[94] For example, they explain the importance of using different data sources to identify

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[91] Guest, Greg, Emily Namey, and Mario Chen. "A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research." *PloS one* 15, no. 5 (2020).

[92] Faulkner, Sandra L., and Stormy P. Trotter. "Data saturation." *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods* (2017): 1-2.

[93] Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales." *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health* 13, no. 2 (2021): 201-216.

[94] Naeem, Muhammad, Wilson Ozuem, Kerry Howell, and Silvia Ranfagni. "Demystification and actualisation of data saturation in qualitative research through thematic analysis." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23 (2024): 12.

themes, which this study does through the analysis of articles from not only two different newspapers, but multiple voices from each, including journalists and readers.[95] Furthermore, they emphasise the importance of developing themes which are clearly differentiated from one another in order to present an "inclusive analysis of the research outcomes."[96] As explained in "4.4. Procedure," ensuring clear delineation between themes was carefully considered throughout. Overall, it was found that the use of opinion articles ensured a very in-depth, comprehensive range of perspectives on this research topic, aligning with their data saturation criteria. Nonetheless, data saturation was not achieved in a manner conventional of some qualitative methods of research, given its incongruence with the foundational principles and aims of thematic analysis.

4.4. Procedure:

As mentioned, this study adheres to Braun and Clarke's six-step process for thematic analysis. The first step involves data familiarisation, which involves "reading and re-reading" data and briefly noting any initial analytical ideas surrounding them.[97] This was done several times throughout the early stages of this process, with physical mind maps used to explore initial ideas.

The next step is systematic coding. This study aims to uncover implicit meanings of articles, as identity and group affiliation can be displayed and contested in subtle and non-explicit ways.[98] Therefore, codes applied to the data were selected inductively and were not predetermined based on the theoretical framework of the research. Rather, the theoretical framework was used to flag concepts related to identity such as ethno-symbols, shared pasts, and rituals. Coding was done line-by-line, with these codes subsequently being condensed into a smaller set, as similar codes such as "Prevailing religiosity" and "Importance of religiousness" were merged. These codes sought to demonstrate the analytical direction of the content they were assigned to. For example, instead of labelling a line using a purely descriptive code such as "British Empire," the code would aim to reflect what was being said about this topic. For example, it could instead be labelled as "Continued importance of the

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[95] Ibid., 10.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (SAGE Publications, 2021): 170.
[98] Matherly, Ted, and Anastasiya Pocheptsova Ghosh. "Is what you feel what they see? Prominent and subtle identity signaling in intergroup interactions." *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 30, no. 4 (2017): 828.

British Empire to the UK." This helped to prepare for the theme generation stage, which necessarily refers to the analytical direction of extracts from the data, since themes seek to reflect "patterns of meaning" rather than the frequency of topics.[99]

Next, initial themes were developed by compiling codes tackling similar concepts relevant to the research aim. The fourth phase of developing and reviewing these themes was particularly important. To avoid simply assigning topic summaries, as Braun and Clarke warn against, these themes were also developed to demonstrate the analytical direction, presented as narratives purported by the writers of the articles.[100] For example, an initial theme like "Brexit and Peace in NI" was refined to "Brexit is destabilising NI's peace process" to demonstrate the analytical direction. This theme development and review process entailed multiple reiterations and considerations before phase 5 was reached, where the final naming of the themes was completed.

Lastly, phase 6 involves writing up the themes. This was the longest part of the process and required frequent revisiting of previous phases to re-evaluate the delineation of themes and their organisation. This was to ensure they worked together to tell a "coherent and persuasive story about the dataset," which addressed my research aim and did justice to the richness of the data.[101]

5. Results and Discussion:

In thematic analysis, the results are often presented separately from the analytical discussion section. For this research, it has been deemed appropriate to synthesise these two sections. In this way, repetition is avoided and rich extracts for the research aim can be discussed in detailed rather than general terms. Hence, this chapter will introduce the themes produced from thematic analysis and key extracts which demonstrate them, discussing them in tandem with NILT 2016 data and scholarship discussed in the Theoretical and Conceptual Framework and Literature Review to gain as thorough an analysis as possible. As an overview, the themes identified were: Brexit's far-reaching impact on NI; Dissatisfaction with Stormont; A Desire to Move on; and The Sensitivity of Identity Markers in NI. These

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[99] Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (SAGE Publications, 2021): 81.
[100] Ibid., 294.
[101] Ibid., 174.

four themes are split into sub-themes in order to represent the breadth of the dataset. Discussion of the results is occasionally supplemented with the inclusion of NILT 2016 survey data, only where most relevant as this is primarily a study grounded in qualitative data.

Theme 1: Brexit's far-reaching impact on NI:

Sub-theme 1.1: Brexit has reignited border debates:

In the collected data, both opinion articles in the *Irish News* and the *Belfast Telegraph* describe the reignition of border debates in NI as a result of Brexit.

Articles in the *Irish News* typically depict Brexit as a catalyst for the united Ireland question and its potential realisation, as demonstrated in the following extracts:

> "Since the Brexit vote the reunification has never received so much attention." (*Irish News*, Anne Quinn, Letters to the Editor, 08-12-2016)[102]

> "Are we about to see the Cross of St Patrick removed from the Union Flag as we see NI slowly pushed towards a united Ireland in order to secure EU funding on an all-Ireland basis should the UK leave the EU?" (*Irish News*, James Annett, Letters to the Editor, 13-12-2016)[103]

This reignition of the united Ireland question due to Brexit is presented as grounds to hold a border poll in the region, as evident in this extract from a Letter to the Editor:

> "Sinn Féin now see Brexit as a stepping stone to Irish reunification but for some reason couldn't see this advantage before the referendum. However, I do believe there should be a choice for the people: Do you wish to stay within Great Britain? Do you wish to leave Great Britain and unite with the rest of Ireland?" (*Irish News*, Joseph Kennedy, Letters to the Editor, 15-12-2016)[104]

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[102] Quinn, Anne. "North's future in UK has never been more fragile." *Irish News.* December 8, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/08/news/social-segregation-made-worse-by-academic-selection-at-11-824712/

[103] Annett, James. "Nationalists' position at Stormont still unclear." *Irish News.* December 13, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/13/news/nationalists-position-at-stormont-still-unclear-832672/

[104] Kennedy, Joseph. "There will be no hard border." *Irish News*. December 15, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/07/news/sinn-fe-in-has-simply-morphed-into-mirror-image-of-sdlp-822035/

In the *Belfast Telegraph*, the perception that the border debate has been reignited due to Brexit is also evident. However, articles tend to adopt a more sceptical tone towards this discussion, portraying nationalist hopes as unrealistic. This is evident in the following extract:

> "Partly, this is another outburst of post-Brexit silliness. After the vote in June Sinn Fein convinced itself that a united Ireland was just around the corner and that it had better start making preparations for it in double-quick time. As the Scottish Nationalists are also discovering, it's not quite that straightforward – and it certainly isn't inevitable." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Eilis O'Hanlon, Analysis, 05-12-2016)[105]

The tone in this article in the *Belfast Telegraph* veers towards mockery, characterising the nationalist sentiments that Brexit makes a united Ireland more likely as "fantasies," and mockingly describing a border poll as nationalists' "precious border poll."

> "The disappointment may be immense when [nationalists] realise that it ain't happening. In fact, there may even be a good argument right now for letting it have its precious border poll, as only a resounding No will be sufficient to prove to it that Brexit has not progressed it as far along that road as it naively hoped." (*Belfast Telegraph,* Eilis O'Hanlon, Analysis, 05-12-2016)[106]

Variation in contributors' perception on the reignition of the border debate could be attributed to the perseverance of ethnonational identities in NI. "Letters to the Editor" printed in the *Irish News* advocate for a border poll and express optimism that such a poll will be carried out and result in a vote in favour of a united Ireland. Conversely, Eilis O'Hanlon, a contributor to the *Belfast Telegraph* who is known to be anti-nationalist, mocks such beliefs, presenting them as naïve.[107] As established in the Methodology, the *Irish News* is a historically nationalist newspaper. Therefore, the positive perspective of contributors in this newspaper could be indicative of an alignment with Irish nationalist ideology, while O'Hanlon's scepticism is reflective of her opposition to this ideology.

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[105] O'Hanlon, Eilis. "Yes, it's politics but not as we know it with DUP and Sinn Fein who used to tear strips off each other." *Belfast Telegraph.* December 13, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/news-analysis/yes-its-politics-but-not-as-we-know-it-with-dup-and-sinn-fein-who-used-to-tear-strips-off-each-other/35288931.html

[106] Ibid.

[107] McDonald, Henry, "Chick-lit flourishes in singletons' Dublin," The Guardian, theguardian.com, accessed March 13, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/feb/29/booksnews.ireland

This discrepancy in tone and stance appears to align with the NILT 2016 survey results for the question, "Does the UK leaving the European Union make a United Ireland more likely?"[108] Results from Catholic respondents and Protestant respondents both show a majority of responses saying it would make no difference (at 48% and 57% respectively). However, Catholic respondents were more likely to perceive Brexit as increasing the likelihood of a United Ireland at 32%, while 21% of Protestant respondents selected this option. These results support the findings of the analysis of the newspaper extracts.

Sub-theme 1.2: Brexit is destabilising NI's peace process:

Articles from both newspapers also reference concerns that Brexit threatens NI's peace process, as demonstrated by the following extracts:

> "[The GFA] was signed after decades of bitter division and bloody disorder. And yet May seems happy to consider it mere collateral damage in her bid to make her party the champion of little Englanders. This is short-sighted and risks the return of serious political unrest in NI." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Siobhan Fenton, Columnist, 29-12-2016)[109]

> "The Fresh Start had given Sinn Féin and the DUP a welcome year of serenity and the calmer atmosphere was showing signs of new growth. But most of that was swept away by Brexit.[110]" (*Irish News*, Denis Bradley, Columnist, 02-12-2016)[111]

This discussion often emphasises NI's distinctiveness in terms of their voting patterns and political needs versus the rest of the UK, particularly regarding the impact EU membership had on NI and the impact Brexit could have on their peace process:

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[108] ARK, "Do you think that the UK leaving the European Union has made a United Ireland more likely, less likely, or has it made no difference?", ark.ac.uk, accessed January 13, 2024, https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2016/Political_Attitudes/UNIRLIKL.html

[109] Fenton, Siobhan. "Theresa May is risking peace in Northern Ireland to pursue the anti-human rights agenda of her Little Englanders." *Belfast Telegraph*. December 29, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/theresa-may-is-risking-peace-in-northern-ireland-to-pursue-the-anti-human-rights-agenda-of-her-little-englanders-siobhan-fenton/35328655.html

[110] "The Fresh Start Agreement" was signed in 2015, aiming to tackle paramilitary activity in NI and to provide Stormont with a fresh start to address identity topics such as peace walls, flag debates, and parade debates. See: Bell, Christine, Robbie McVeigh, and An Dúchán. "A Fresh Start for Equality? The Equality Impacts of the Stormont House Agreement on the 'Two Main Communities'." *Equality Coalition* (2016): 4-8.

[111] Bradley, Denis. "Gerry Adams is a hindrance and has to go." *Irish News*. December 2, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/columnists/2016/12/02/news/denis-bradley-gerry-adams-is-now-a-hindrance-and-has-to-go-812189/

> "Due to the legacy of the Troubles, NI has more immediate need than anywhere else in the UK for a robust, legal human rights framework." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Siobhan Fenton, Columnist, 29-12-2016)[112]

> "Having launched us out of Europe without a thought for the effect on Northern Ireland, the Conservative Party has now timetabled an equally ignorant departure from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) […] this would need to be carefully explained to avoid misrepresentation by the rights sector. As nobody in Westminster seems to appreciate this, yet more needless damage to our politics seems inevitable. (*Irish News*, Newton Emerson, Columnist, 31-12-2016)[113]

> "Let me say here that I voted Remain in the referendum - I'm no fan of the European Union, which I consider dysfunctional and elitist, deeply resistant to reform from within, but I reluctantly voted to stay because I feared the destabilising effects of leaving, particularly on our own fragile set-up in Northern Ireland." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Fionola Meredith, Columnist, 16-12-2016)[114]

These concerns surrounding the peace process reflect a shared desire from contributors for Northern Ireland to continue moving away from ethnonational violence and towards a peaceful and stable future. References to the risks of political unrest and the threat to the peace process indicate a collective recognition of the significance of the relative peace that was achieved after the Troubles.

Unionism conceives of NI as being rightfully part of the UK, so unionist narratives tend to emphasise the similarities between NI and the rest of the UK.[115] Therefore, it is notable that articles in the *Belfast Telegraph* are willing to highlight NI's distinctiveness in this context.

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[112] Fenton, Siobhan. "Theresa May is risking peace in Northern Ireland to pursue the anti-human rights agenda of her Little Englanders." *Belfast Telegraph.* https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/theresa-may-is-risking-peace-in-northern-ireland-to-pursue-the-anti-human-rights-agenda-of-her-little-englanders-siobhan-fenton/35328655.html

[113] Newton, Emerson. "Lack of RHI rules poses a problem for Stormont." *Irish News.* December 31, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/columnists/2016/12/31/news/newton-emerson-lack-of-rhi-rules-poses-a-problem-for-stormont-855970/

[114] Meredith, Fionola. "You don't like Brexit or Trump? Sorry but that is what democracy is all about." *Belfast Telegraph.* December 16, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/fionola-meredith/you-dont-like-brexit-or-trump-sorry-but-that-is-what-democracy-is-all-about/35297328.html

[115] For research on this, see, for example: Cetrà, Daniel, and Coree Brown Swan. "Speaking for 'our precious Union': unionist claims in the time of Brexit, 2016–20." *Territory, Politics, Governance* 10, no. 5 (2022): 646-660.

This recognition could reflect a pragmatic approach to Brexit and its implications for the region, demonstrating a willingness to diverge from traditional unionist framings of NI's position in the UK in order to prioritise the maintenance of peace. This observation aligns with Hall's and Bhabha's understanding of the fluidity of identity depending on the societal context in which individuals find themselves.[116] While this sub-theme does not necessarily evidence a shift in identity categorisation, it does demonstrate a willingness to reconsider one's understanding and representation of topics intrinsically linked to identity, such as the place of NI in the UK for unionists.

Sub-theme 1.3: The UK government's ignorance towards NI is highlighted by their handling of Brexit:

A key sub-theme in both newspapers surrounds the depiction of these threats to the peace process as not purely a result of Brexit, but of the UK authorities' handling of Brexit. Contributors characterise the UK government as incompetent, as evident in the following extracts:

> "Theresa [May] has positioned herself as the Pied Piper of Brexit, but is scant on the detail of where she is leading us. Or, as with those leather trousers, how much this will cost." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Lindy McDowell, Columnist, 28-12-2016)[117]

> "David Cameron confirmed my view of him as, 'one of the worst prime ministers ever'; making an absolute dog's dinner of everything he has touched since December 2007, then scuttling off to join the international rubber chicken circuit rather than deal with the consequences of his own mess." (*Irish News*, Alex Kane, Columnist, 30-12-2016)[118]

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[116] Bhabha, Homi K. *The location of culture*. (Routledge, 2012): 1-3; Hall, Stuart, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity," in *Questions of cultural identity,* ed. Grossberg, Lawrence, Stuart Hall, and Paul Du Gay (SAGE Publications, 1996): 6.

[117] McDowell, Lindy. "The glass ceiling took a right old battering throughout the year, but can women stay on top over the coming 12 months?" *Belfast Telegraph.* December 28, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/lindy-mcdowell/the-glass-ceiling-took-a-right-old-battering-throughout-the-year-but-can-women-stay-on-top-over-the-coming-12-months/35322986.html

[118] Kane, Alex. "Don't expect too much political change in 2017." *Irish News.* December 30, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/columnists/2016/12/30/news/alex-kane-don-t-expect-too-much-political-change-in-2017-855751/

This incompetence is attributed by some contributors to their ignorance surrounding NI's distinctiveness:

> "Despite sharing a border with another EU country and only recently emerging from a peace process after decades of conflict, NI has hardly featured at all in the debates over Brexit." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Siobhan Fenton, Columnist, 29-12-2016)[119]

> "As nobody in Westminster seems to appreciate [the risk of departing from the ECHR for NI], yet more needless damage to our politics seems inevitable." (*Irish News*, Newton Emerson, Columnist, 31-12-2016)[120]

This criticism is presented as part of a historical trend of UK authorities' lack of care for NI, with Brexit highlighting it and exacerbating it:

> "NI has been ignored for successive Governments since Tony Blair left office in 2007, but the matter is spinning out of control in the aftermath of the EU referendum." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Siobhan Fenton, Columnist, 29-12-2016)[121]

This sub-theme which was developed for both the *Irish News* articles and the *Belfast Telegraph* articles demonstrates emerging identity dynamics in NI characterised by a deepening sense of division and frustration with the rest of the UK. While there is no evidence of identity categorisation shifts in these extracts, Hall and Bhabha's conceptions of identity as fluid suggests this increased perceived lack of care from the UK could prompt a re-evaluation of NI's place within the UK, potentially having implications for unionist-leaning contributors' sense of belonging within the UK as a whole.

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[119] Fenton, Siobhan. "Theresa May is risking peace in Northern Ireland to pursue the anti-human rights agenda of her Little Englanders." *Belfast Telegraph.* December 29, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/theresa-may-is-risking-peace-in-northern-ireland-to-pursue-the-anti-human-rights-agenda-of-her-little-englanders-siobhan-fenton/35328655.html

[120] Newton, Emerson. "Lack of RHI rules poses a problem for Stormont." *Irish News.* December 31, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/columnists/2016/12/31/news/newton-emerson-lack-of-rhi-rules-poses-a-problem-for-stormont-855970/

[121] Fenton, Siobhan. "Theresa May is risking peace in Northern Ireland to pursue the anti-human rights agenda of her Little Englanders." *Belfast Telegraph.* December 29, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/theresa-may-is-risking-peace-in-northern-ireland-to-pursue-the-anti-human-rights-agenda-of-her-little-englanders-siobhan-fenton/35328655.html

Sub-theme 1.4: Britain's attitude is archaic:

Dissatisfaction with Britain in articles from the *Irish News* extends beyond the UK government's perceived ignorance towards NI, and to Britain's attitude in general. Articles in the *Irish News* tend to portray Britain as archaic or stuck in the past, as evidenced in the following extracts:

> "While the rest of the world celebrates New Year with parties and fireworks, the British also use the occasion to claim they still have an empire […] News of the Empire's disappearance does not appear to have reached Britain." (*Irish News*, Patrick Murphy, Columnist, 31-12-2016)[122]

This contributor connects these archaic tendencies to Britain's historic violence against Ireland:

> "It's difficult to understand Britain's glorification of an empire which killed countless millions across the world including in this country." (*Irish News*, Patrick Murphy, Columnist, 31-12-2016)[123]

Furthermore, the *Irish News* generally portrays Britain's attitude surrounding Brexit as evidence of Britain's archaism and arrogance, as demonstrated best by the following extract:

> "But Britain does not think the [EU withdrawal] rules apply to it. Vaingloriously clinging to its imperial past, Britain believes it is 'too big to fall' […] Rule Britannia, Britannia waives the rules." (*Irish News*, Tom Collins, Columnist, 09-12-2016)[124]

This perspective may reflect a broader sentiment within nationalist-leaning parts of society, which views Britain and its contemporary actions through a critical lens, linking them to perceived British wrongdoings – particularly linked to imperialism – in the past. The absence of this sub-theme in the *Belfast Telegraph* may indicate that this perception is more common among nationalist-leaning people.

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[122] Murphy, Patrick. "British should honour victims with the truth." *Irish News.* December 31, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/columnists/2016/12/31/news/patrick-murphy-british-should-honour-victims-by-disclosing-the-truth-855682/
[123] Ibid.
[124] Collins, Tom. "Is Europe ready for the Great British Cake-Off?" *Irish News.* December 9, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/columnists/2016/12/09/news/is-europe-ready-for-the-great-british-cake-off--824560/

Theme 2: Dissatisfaction with Stormont:

Sub-theme 2.1: Stormont is dysfunctional:

A common sub-theme within both newspapers surrounds the depiction of Stormont as dysfunctional and unfit for purpose. This is often presented as a result of an inherent problem in the power-sharing arrangement at Stormont which prevents effective treatment of issues by NI authorities. In the *Irish News*, this is elaborated on as dysfunction effectively allowing Britain and/or England to promote their own interests in lieu of a well-functioning NI Executive, as evident in the following extracts:

> "Because the interests of the DUP and Sinn Féin are diametrically opposed, the DUP will never agree on key issues with those they regard as 'rogues' 'renegades' or 'remoaners'. The British can serve their own interests, while hiding behind the fiction that Westminster was forced to act because there was no agreement." (*Irish News*, Martin Galvin, Letters to the Editor, 01-12-2016)[125]

> "Arlene Foster continues to deliberately ignore the democratic will of the people of the north, preferring to acquiesce to English nationalism, putting up no objections on behalf of us and refusing to even accept that we should have special status in relation to Brexit." (*Irish News*, Denise Johnston, Letters to the Editor, 06-12-2016)[126]

Some *Irish News* contributors go further, characterising this dysfunction as a result of Stormont's own British bias as opposed to merely going along with British interests:

> "Continuing events at Stormont have served to shed new light upon the ugly reality that is the British Regional Assembly upon the Hill, and those parties within. […] Stormont is a British administration. Those who participate in such a political entity are administering British rule." (*Irish News*, Anton O Dala An Ri, Letters to the Editor, 13-12-2016)[127]

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[125] Galvin, Martin. "Why is it so twisted to ask if Sinn Féin's strategy is working for us?" *Irish News*. December 1, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/01/news/why-is-it-twisted-to-ask-is-sf-s-strategy-is-working-for-us--811917/

[126] Johnston, Denise. "Well done Sinn Féin your supporters must be proud of you." *Irish News*. December 6, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/06/news/well-done-sinn-fe-in-your-supporters-must-be-proud-of-you-819457/

[127] O Dala An Ri, Anton. "Nationalists' position at Stormont still unclear." *Irish News*. December 13, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/13/news/nationalists-position-at-stormont-still-unclear-832672/

Frustration is directed at SF for their perceived propping up of a Stormont government which is, at best, unionist-biased, and at worst, British-biased. Extracts from The *Irish News* reflect a perception that SF fail to represent true nationalism due to the structure of Stormont, since their ability to do so is restricted by the requirement to power-share with the DUP. This is demonstrated by the following extracts:

> "According to a report in The Irish News (November 11), the DUP's education minister Peter Weir has stopped translating publications and correspondence into the Irish language. What is the so-called deputy first minister doing about it? What are the other leading lights in Sinn Féin and the SDLP doing about it? They are so hamstrung by the DUP they are afraid to speak out in defence of the language. Is there no-one to fight the nationalist/republican cause? Our history, our language, our culture are being systematically eroded without as much as a whimper of objection from those who are supposed to have our interests at heart. Are we to just roll over and accept whatever the DUP decides for us or is it more important for our representatives to scrape and bow to British royalty?" (*Irish News*, Val Morgan, Letters to the Editor, 01-12-2016)[128]

Contributors also present Stormont's power-sharing set-up as leading SF to succumb to British interests, as evident in the following extracts:

> "Why then [does SF] continue to prop up and front a British Tory austerity regime in tandem with the DUP?" (*Irish News*, Martin Galvin, Letters to the Editor, 01-12-2016)[129]

> "Whatever about the core membership of Sinn Féin, […] the current leadership are not republican. They have dragged the party, by the nose, from a position of principle and integrity into a political dead-end. They have allowed themselves to be manipulated and out-manoeuvred by successive British governments." (*Irish News*, Anton O Dala An Ri, Letters to the Editor, 13-12-2016)[130]

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[128] Morgan, Val. "Our history, our language." *Irish News*. December 1, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/01/news/why-is-it-twisted-to-ask-is-sf-s-strategy-is-working-for-us--811917/

[129] Galvin, Martin. "Why is it so twisted to ask if Sinn Féin's strategy is working for us?" *Irish News*. December 1, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/01/news/why-is-it-twisted-to-ask-is-sf-s-strategy-is-working-for-us--811917/

[130] O Dala An Ri, Anton. "Nationalists' position at Stormont still unclear." *Irish News*. December 13, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/13/news/nationalists-position-at-stormont-still-unclear-832672/

While this sub-theme is less pronounced in the *Belfast Telegraph* articles, there is evidence of a desire to transition away from the Stormont system. For example, Eilis O'Hanlon, who is known to be anti-nationalist, expresses regret over NI's dependence on Westminster:[131]

> "We can't always be depending on outsiders, either in Westminster or Washington, to solve our problems. NI has to be ready to stand on its own two feet, however shakily."
> (*Belfast Telegraph*, Eilis O'Hanlon, Analysis, 13-12-2016)[132]

This writer goes on to describe the current political set-up as "a teensy bit odd, if not downright unnatural."[133]

This sub-theme reflects frustration among contributors to the *Irish News* surrounding SF's perceived inability or unwillingness to uphold "true" nationalism within the constraints of the Stormont power-sharing structure. This suggests a level of internal division within the nationalist community over the role of nationalist politicians in a post-GFA, power-sharing context. The tension surrounding SF's manner of participating in Stormont reflects concerns surrounding the compatibility of nationalist aspirations with the GFA's principles of power-sharing and ethnonational reconciliation. This dissatisfaction with representation aligns with the responses to the NILT 2016 question, "Do you feel that you have any influence when it comes to any of the decisions made about what happens in Northern Ireland?" to which 31% of Catholic respondents chose "Probably not" and 41% chose "Definitely not."[134] This demonstrates the sentiment that their voices are not being adequately represented at Stormont.

The debates also highlight the perception of SF and the DUP/Britain as opposing forces, demonstrating the continued understanding of these groups' aims being against one another. Importantly, Val Morgan's Letter to the Editor emphasises the importance of Irish language, history, and culture to nationalism, calling on nationalist leaders to protect these. This reflects an Imagined Community for nationalists which not only shares collective nationalist

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[131] McDonald, Henry, "Chick-lit flourishes in singletons' Dublin," The Guardian, theguardian.com, accessed March 13, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/feb/29/booksnews.ireland

[132] O'Hanlon, Eilis. "Yes, it's politics but not as we know it with DUP and Sinn Fein who used to tear strips off each other." *Belfast Telegraph.* December 13, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/news-analysis/yes-its-politics-but-not-as-we-know-it-with-dup-and-sinn-fein-who-used-to-tear-strips-off-each-other/35288931.html

[133] Ibid.

[134] ARK, **"**Do you feel that you have any influence when it comes to any of the decisions made about what happens in Northern Ireland?" ark.ac.uk, accessed January 13, 2024, https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2016/Community_Relations/INFLNI.html

aspirations for NI, but also shares the perception of a shared past and distinct cultural markers, indicating an ethnonational conceptualisation of identity. Overall, these debates demonstrate the enduring importance of ethnonational identity and aspirations and how these should be represented at the political level.

The *Belfast Telegraph*'s contributor's call for NI to move away from the current set-up of Stormont also indicates discontent with the arrangement. However, this sentiment isn't expressed in ethnonational terms. Instead, it diverges from the traditional unionist call for strengthening relations with Britain by advocating for a distancing from Westminster. Therefore, this excerpt suggests that the contributor's dissatisfaction with Stormont is coupled with a broader desire to establish a new system untethered from NI's historical and ethnonationalist divisions.

As outlined in the literature review, Hayward and McManus' found that the GFA has not fostered an environment conducive to the emergence of a hybrid or "third way" of politics outside of ethnonationalism, despite a growing trend of individuals identifying outside of strict ethnonational identity labels. These ongoing debates, alongside a call to move beyond the power-sharing executive system established by the GFA, substantiate these findings.

Sub-theme 2.2: Stormont is linked to paramilitarism:

A specific criticism of Stormont surrounds its perceived links to paramilitary organisations, specifically those with unionist orientations. This links to the previous theme which demonstrated frustration at Stormont's perceived British/unionist bias. Generally, the *Irish News* articles critique Stormont's allocation of funding to Charter NI, a community organisation with ties to members of the UDA, a loyalist paramilitary group formed in 1971.

> "Current applicants [to Stormont's Social Investment Fund] include two community groups in east Belfast run by UDA boss Jimmy Birch, an associate of Dee Stitt. Both men are also on the board of the Stormont-funded Charter NI." (*Irish News*, Newton Emerson, Columnist, 10-12-2016) [135]

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[135] Emerson, Newton. "Belfast council-run investment funds now under spotlight." *Irish News*. December 10, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/columnists/2016/12/10/news/newton-emerson-belfast-council-run-investment-funds-now-under-spotlight-826949/

"Arlene also thinks it's appropriate to fund 'ex' paramilitaries. The Social Investment Fund should be about improving the lives of impoverished and disadvantaged communities. The irony is that some of these communities are in that position because they are controlled by paramilitaries such as the UDA. The allocation of £1.7 million to Charter NI, of which Dee Stitt is CEO, raises serious concerns about where this public money is actually going." (*Irish News*, Denise Johnston, Letters to the Editor, 06-12-2016)[136]

This sub-theme clearly reveals the persistent concerns surrounding paramilitarism in NI among contributors, particularly regarding Stormont's funding of groups who are viewed as tied to unionist paramilitary organisations such as the UDA. These paramilitary organisations are strongly associated with extreme ethnonational loyalties, with these groups having carried out armed campaigns during the Troubles in the name of their ethnonational identities and ideologies.[137] Therefore, references to paramilitary connections suggest that ethnonational identity continues to shape political perceptions, influencing how contributors interpret governmental actions such as funding allocations by Stormont. This sub-theme demonstrates that paramilitarism is still a prominent and contentious issue for contributors, indicating the enduring relevance of ethnonational divide in aspects of NI society. Such debates recall the intense paramilitary dynamics of the Troubles era, indicating that this dynamic is not perceived to have been fully resolved.

Sub-theme 2.3: Stormont lacks accountability due to cronyism:

This sub-theme reflecting perceived cronyism within Stormont intersects with the previous sub-theme discussing Stormont's paramilitary links. This crossover of sub-themes is most clearly evident in the *Belfast Telegraph*, where the failure of SF's Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, to confront the funding of Charter NI is attributed to cronyism within Stormont:

"McGuinness has asked the loyalist leader [Dee Stitt of Charter NI] to 'reconsider' his position as head of Charter NI, which has £1.7m of public funds to distribute in east

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[136] Johnston, Denise. "Well done Sinn Féin your supporters must be proud of you." *Irish News*. December 6, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/06/news/well-done-sinn-fe-in-your-supporters-must-be-proud-of-you-819457/

[137] Winstanley, Katie. "Constructing Identities: Paramilitary Disarmament and Ceasefire in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country.": 2-15.

Belfast. He could have come out and demanded an end to the dodgy allocation of so much public money to even dodgier organisations and individuals; but he can't do that, because that would upset Sinn Féin's own legion of dodgy fronts." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Eilis O'Hanlon, Analysis, 05-12-2016)[138]

This extract also implies that SF is involved in behaviour which is not transparent or above-board, reflecting the sentiment that politics in NI remains intertwined with questionable and potentially paramilitary associations.

In another article from the same columnist, the DUP and SF are accused of overlooking one another's failings, prioritising the maintenance of their respective political influences and thus ability to promote their own interests over holding each other to account:

"What happened to the days when the two main parties wasted no opportunity to tear strips out of one another, leaping on every blunder in an effort to undermine the other? Now they seem to have come to a sort of unwritten 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' contract whereby they turn the blindest of blind eyes to one another's failings." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Eilis O'Hanlon, Analysis, 13-12-2016)[139]

This sub-theme is also evident in the *Irish News*, with SF criticised for failing to take a stand against these funding controversies as a result of cronyism within Stormont:

"The total refusal by both the First and Deputy First Ministers to tackle the continuing scandal of UDA paramilitarism and its links to Charter NI should perhaps not be all that great a surprise. Yet the cronyism between Sinn Féin and the DUP has plummeted to new depths as they try to cover each other's backs with their dubious actions in what can only be viewed as a total disregard for the concerns of the general public." (*Irish News*, Margaret Ritchie, Letters to the Editor, 07-12-2016)[140]

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[138] O'Hanlon, Eilis. "Why Sinn Fein needs to forget about unity and focus on Brexit." *Belfast Telegraph*. December 5, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/news-analysis/why-sinn-fein-needs-to-forget-about-unity-and-focus-on-brexit/35267097.html

[139] O'Hanlon, Eilis. "Yes, it's politics but not as we know it with DUP and Sinn Fein who used to tear strips off each other." *Belfast Telegraph*. December 13, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/news-analysis/yes-its-politics-but-not-as-we-know-it-with-dup-and-sinn-fein-who-used-to-tear-strips-off-each-other/35288931.html

[140] Ritchie, Margaret. "Blatant thumbing of noses at north's electorate." *Irish News*. December 7, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/07/news/sinn-fe-in-has-simply-morphed-into-mirror-image-of-sdlp-822035/

Notably, this contributor describes how this type of cronyism fuels paramilitarism in NI:

> "Continued inaction on this issue does nothing to aid a 'tradition' away from paramilitarism – rather it further entrenches it." (*Irish News*, Margaret Ritchie, Letters to the Editor, 07-12-2016)[141]

This reflects the sentiment that the political system's facilitation of cronyism has contributed to the continued existence of paramilitarism in NI, despite an indication that the people of NI aspire to move away from this.

This sub-theme reflects scepticism among contributors towards Stormont, characterising the DUP's and SF's power-sharing as shaped by cronyism. In turn, this cronyism prevents the political leaders in Stormont from being held to account, with failings ignored and ethnonational activity overlooked in the aim of each party maintaining political influence. The frustration surrounding this cronyism in these extracts suggests that contributors want their government to move away from these covert ethnonational ties, indicating a disconnect between the will of the people and the will of the government leaders. Contributors appear sceptical of continued ethnonationalism within Stormont, which they see as evident through Stormont funding organisations with paramilitary ties. This scepticism and frustration therefore demonstrates that these contributors may prefer a truly post-ethnonational government, or at least one that does not promote ethnonational interests in such covert ways. This finding will be explored in greater detail in the next Theme, "Desire to move on."

Theme 3: Desire to move on:

Sub-theme 3.1: Legacy issues are not being dealt with correctly:

The previous sub-theme included some indication that there is a discrepancy between the will of the people and the will of the government, with contributors unhappy that politicians in Stormont appear to be continuing to promote their ethnonational interests. This discrepancy between what the people want and what authorities do is also evidenced by this sub-theme, "Legacy cases are not being dealt with properly." Legacy cases refer to Troubles-era cases which have often not been resolved, and this sub-theme reflects contributors' frustration with how NI and UK authorities handle them. This sub-theme is most noticeably present in the *Irish News*.

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[141] Ibid.

Contributors in the *Irish News* discuss unresolved cases surrounding British or unionist paramilitary issues. They criticise the removal of funding allocated to investigating these cases, portraying it as indicative of British/unionist paramilitary complicity in such cases. This sentiment is best evidenced in the following extract:

> "Arlene has also put a stop to the funding for legacy cases. NIO (Northern Ireland Office) won't release funding until they receive the request from the First Minister – she is blocking it not the British. She won't make that request because this will damage the integrity of the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary). […] her attempts to stem the flow of evidence that points towards collusion within state forces is in itself an attempt to rewrite history." (*Irish News,* Denise Johnston, Letters to the Editor, 06-12-2016) [142]

Speculation that Britain also benefit from the withdrawal of this funding is also evident in the following extract:

> "The denial of legacy inquest funding is just one obvious example [of the British authorities serving their own interests during Stormont stalemates]." (*Irish News,* Martin Galvin, Letters to the Editor, 01-12-2016)[143]

This sentiment that legacy cases need to be investigated for society to move on involves calls for Britain/England in particular to acknowledge their role in the Troubles and investigate alleged crimes the British government and army have been accused of:

> "The London government has changed from a complete denial of collusion to effectively one of – we weren't the only ones fighting so why is everyone picking on us. […] For decades [British authorities] have frustrated investigation of what can only be described as war crimes and are unlikely to ever give the families the closure they demand." (The *Irish News,* Gerard Herdman, Letters to the Editor, 22-12-2016)[144]

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[142] Johnston, Denise. "Well done Sinn Féin your supporters must be proud of you." *Irish News.* December 6, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/06/news/well-done-sinn-fe-in-your-supporters-must-be-proud-of-you-819457/

[143] Galvin, Martin. "Why is it so twisted to ask if Sinn Féin's strategy is working for us?" *Irish News.* December 1, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/01/news/why-is-it-twisted-to-ask-is-sf-s-strategy-is-working-for-us--811917/

[144] Herdman, Gerard. "A gram of publicity in England is worth a tonne in Ireland." *Irish News.* December 22, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/22/news/only-one-church-can-claim-unbroken-line-back-to-st-peter-847208/

The *Belfast Telegraph* also includes contributions from people with similar perspectives to those in the *Irish News*, where the investigation of legacy cases is framed as necessary for societal progress. In the following extract, however, the discussion appears more neutral, with the discussion centring on the investigation of the British government and "paramilitary groups" broadly, which could encompass both loyalist and nationalist factions:

> "Murder inquiries into alleged human rights breaches by paramilitary groups and the British government during the Troubles are continuing to this day, decades after the crimes were committed, as the region pieces together the past and learns from it to secure a stable future." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Siobhan Fenton, Columnist, 29-12-2016)[145]

The following extract also appears more neutral, discussing both a legacy case involving killings of unionist workers by the IRA as well as killings of Catholic civilians by the British Army:

> "If the British must have an honours system, they might like to honour (in a non-imperial way) the relatives of those killed at Kingsmill and Ballymurphy, for example, for their dignity in the face of government evasion, intransigence and secrecy. Probably the only honour these people really want is the truth about what happened to their loved ones." (*Irish News,* Patrick Murphy, Columnist, 31-12-2016)[146]

In one instance in the *Belfast Telegraph,* this topic is framed in opposing terms to in the *Irish News*. The contributor criticises the framing of RUC officers and Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) soldiers as criminals and calls for the cessation of their prosecution:[147]

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[145] Fenton, Siobhan. "Theresa May is risking peace in Northern Ireland to pursue the anti-human rights agenda of her Little Englanders." *Belfast Telegraph.* December 29, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/theresa-may-is-risking-peace-in-northern-ireland-to-pursue-the-anti-human-rights-agenda-of-her-little-englanders-siobhan-fenton/35328655.html

[146] Murphy, Patrick. "British should honour victims with the truth." *Irish News.* December 31, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/columnists/2016/12/31/news/patrick-murphy-british-should-honour-victims-by-disclosing-the-truth-855682/

[147] The RUC was NI's police force between 1922 to 2001. During the Troubles, the RUC was tasked with policing NI and suppressing terrorist activity. Faced with charges of "sectarian and partisan policing" as well as collusion with Unionist paramilitary groups, in Irish Nationalist communities this force has often been considered to promote Unionist interests. See: Cochrane, Mark. "The role of the royal ulster constabulary in Northern Ireland." *Policing Insurgents: Cops as Counterinsurgents* (2014).

The UDR was a British Army regiment established in NI in 1970 to take over military operations carried out by the RUC. While its stated mission was not explicitly ethnonational, it failed to recruit any substantial number of Catholic members. Catholic soldiers who did join increasingly left due to poor relations between the British Army and Catholic communities following incidents where the British Army mass interned and killed Catholic

> "Many former RUC officers, UDR soldiers and a number of others risk being branded and convicted as criminals [...] I have no compunction in calling for an immediate end to prosecuting former members of the security forces for defending Ulster during the Troubles." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Christopher Luke, Letters to the Editor, 30-12-2016)[148]

These extracts generally suggest that there is a consensus that legacy cases need to be investigated in order for NI's society to move past Troubles-era ethnonational violence and divide. This understanding finds support in scholarship which contends that the lack of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a provision of the GFA has hindered NI's ability to move away from its ethnonational climate.[149] According to this argument, since those who perceive themselves as victims and those who are accused of being perpetrators went through no formal process of reconciliation, their generation is unlikely to be able to overcome sectarian divide. Instead, the prospect of a non-sectarian society is envisioned primarily for younger generations who did not directly experience the Troubles.

Nonetheless, contributors' framing of the issue of legacy cases is indicative of the perseverance of ethnonationalist identities. While some contributors present the British Army and the RUC as complicit in sectarian violence, others express alarm that British and Unionist army and police forces will be wrongfully branded as criminals. This indicates that affiliations to unionist or nationalist identities are influencing their perception of current affairs. However, as it is not possible to verify the affiliations of the contributors, it is not possible to fully substantiate that their responses correspond to ethnonational affiliations.

While contributors express different concerns surrounding legacy cases, there is a broad consensus that these cases need to be resolved in order to achieve reconciliation in NI. Contributors target the authorities of NI and the UK for their role in obstructing this process, indicating a general discontent with these authorities and a belief that they are prioritising self-interested, covert goals over the pursuit of national reconciliation and societal progress.

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people, as well as criminal offenses committed by UDR soldiers against Catholic people. The UDR has thus often been understood in Irish Nationalist communities as a regiment serving Unionist/Protestant/British interests. See: Arnold, Hugo. "Crime, Ulsterisation and the Future of the UDR." *Fortnight* 226 (1985): 4-5.

[148] Luke, Christopher. "Prosecution of police and soldiers must stop." *Belfast Telegraph.* December 30, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/letters/prosecution-of-police-and-soldiers-must-stop/35329851.html

[149] White, Timothy. "Generational Change and Redefining Identities: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland." *Peace Research* (2013): 96.

Sub-theme 3.2: There is a generational divide in NI society:

This sub-theme explores the perception of an existing generational divide in NI society regarding identity topics, as previously touched upon in relation to the importance of legacy cases being addressed for societal change to occur.

In the *Irish News*, this acknowledgement of a generational shift is evident in the following extract, which discusses the sentiment that young nationalists in NI are now able to demonstrate markers of Irishness proudly:

> "Nationalists in the north no longer keep their heads down; the Irish language has never been stronger; Gaelic Games, music and dance has never been more openly celebrated […] Young nationalists by and large go where they want to and are proud to display their identity and culture." (*Irish News*, Anne Quinn, Letters to the Editor, 08-12-2016)[150]

This extract does indicate a shift in identity dynamics in NI, suggesting that nationalists in NI now feel more freedom to display their identity and identity markers without fear of persecution. However, this shift does not appear to signify a departure from ethnonational identification among young people. On the contrary, the emphasis on Irishness and Irish symbols as prominent identity markers underscores the persisting strength of the tie between nationalism and Irishness in NI. This suggests that there has been a shift towards a society where both ethnonational groups can co-exist more peacefully as opposed to a society where people generally identify under shared identity categories – i.e., civic identity categories. This aligns with findings outlined in the literature review, such as those from McNicholl et al., which suggest that the GFA have facilitated a social climate in NI where ethnonational violence has decreased, but ethnonational divides persist. Therefore, this extract supports the notion that while ethnonational identities remain salient in NI, a gradual progression has been observed towards a more tolerant society where individuals from different ethnonational backgrounds can express their identities more openly.

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[150] Quinn, Anne. "North's future in UK has never been more fragile." *Irish News.* December 8, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/08/news/social-segregation-made-worse-by-academic-selection-at-11-824712/

Generational division is also discussed in relation to the political sphere, with the following extract reflecting the expectation that younger politicians would bring progressiveness into Stormont:

> "After the last assembly election I had hoped that the new younger members would be more progressive than the previous assembly." (*Irish News*, Tom Ekin, Letters to the Editor, 20-12-2016)[151]

Many politicians and scholars assume that generations growing up in NI without direct experience of the violence of the Troubles will hold different values and attitudes to previous generations.[152] In turn, these newer generations are expected to display fundamentally different behaviour, even if they retain ethnonational identification, which is less reactionary or hostile to people of different affiliations or identities.[153] This sub-theme reveals this assumption among contributors, demonstrating their belief that it will be younger generations who will drive and feel the change of identity dynamics in NI towards a society in which people of all identities can express themselves openly and exist harmoniously.

Theme 4: The sensitivity of identity markers in NI:

Sub-theme 4.1: Ethno-symbols are relevant identity markers in NI:

In both newspapers, the continued relevance and sensitivity of ethno-symbols is evident. In the *Belfast Telegraph*, this sub-theme is evident in the following extract, which demonstrates the author's concerns surrounding the imposition of "British value oaths" in NI. The Communities Minister of the UK government at the time, Sajid Javid, originally planned this oath to be required for government staff and public office holders. The Guardian speculated on what this oath may contain, suggesting it would require pledging allegiance to "British values" including, for example, "freedom," "heritage," and "free enterprise."[154] This issue is discussed in the following extract:

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[151] Ekin, Tom. "Governments reward those they think will keep them in power." *Irish News.* December 20, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/20/news/governments-reward-those-they-think-will-keep-them-in-power-844008/

[152] White, Timothy. "Generational Change and Redefining Identities: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland." *Peace Research* (2013): 96.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Haynes, Gavin, "Sajid Javid's British values oath: what it might look like," *The Guardian*, December 19, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/shortcuts/2016/dec/19/sajid-javid-british-values-oath-what-it-might-look-like

"Last week, in a move of characteristic short-sightedness, Communities Minister Sajid Javid announced he is considering a British values oath for public sector workers. Such a move would be deeply damaging and divisive in NI, where many Unionists (predominantly members of the Protestant community) identify as British and many Nationalists (predominantly members of the Catholic community) reject a British identity and instead identify as Irish." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Siobhan Fenton, Columnist, 29-12-2016)[155]

This extract describes the sensitivity of ethno-symbols as a manifestation of enduring ethnonational categorisation in NI. The contributor's explanation highlights her understanding of the intertwined nature of Catholicism/Nationalism/Irishness, as well as Protestantism/Unionism/Britishness. This intertwined nature is stated almost as a given, without the contributor feeling they need to give justification to their explanation. This underscores how discussion surrounding political decisions is still shaped by these two ethnonational categories and their distinct rituals and symbols. Furthermore, the contributor is explicit regarding the importance of rejecting symbols of British/Unionist/Protestant identity for Irish/Nationalist/Catholic communities. They present the endurance of Irish/Nationalist/Catholic identity as contingent on a rejection of British/Unionist/Protestant ethno-symbols. This aligns with SIT's conceptualisation of intergroup relations, where rejection of an out-group's identity markers is used to maintain positive social identity and reinforce cohesion among the in-group.[156]

The Orange Order was founded in 1795 following the Protestants' victory at the Battle of the Diamond.[157] As an institution, it sought to celebrate the Protestant faith and "proclaim loyalty to Britain."[158] In contemporary NI, scholars have considered it to have created "social rituals" such as Orange Order parades in order to maintain Protestant and Unionist power.[159] According to Smith's ethno-symbolic approach, rituals are an important part of articulating

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[155] Fenton, Siobhan. "Theresa May is risking peace in Northern Ireland to pursue the anti-human rights agenda of her Little Englanders." *Belfast Telegraph.* December 29, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/theresa-may-is-risking-peace-in-northern-ireland-to-pursue-the-anti-human-rights-agenda-of-her-little-englanders-siobhan-fenton/35328655.html
[156] Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior." In *Political psychology*, (Psychology Press, 2004), 283-284.
[157] Edwards, Jennifer, and J. David Knottnerus. "The orange order: Parades, other rituals, and their outcomes." *Sociological Focus* 43, no. 1 (2010): 3.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid., 15.

and reinforcing ethnonational identity. The importance of such ethno-symbols to Protestant/Unionist/British communities is evident in the following extract:

> "Next day it's Gerry Adams pledging that the Orange Order would have official recognition in the event of all-island reunification – though was that ever in doubt? What were the Shinners planning to do previously – make it a proscribed organisation? [160] Only someone as out of touch with reality as Gerry could make it sound like a generous concession to allow his opponents to exist at all." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Analysis, Eilis O'Hanlon, 05-12-2016)[161]

In fact, in this extract, the ability to participate in organisations tied with historical Protestant/Unionist/British roots is presented as integral to the community's very existence, demonstrating the continued relevance of a shared ethnonational past and ethno-symbols among them, indicating that this contributor still conceptualises this identity as rooted in an ethnonational Imagined Community.

This notion is supported by NILT 2016 survey data, which includes questions about participant perceptions of ethno-symbols. This is most evident in the results of a question targeting loyalist bonfires. Loyalist bonfires are an important ritual within Protestant/Unionist/British communities. These bonfires are lit every year on July 11th within Unionist communities and Irish tri-colour flags or posters of nationalist politicians are frequently burnt in the fires.[162] The relevant question asks respondents to share whether they agree that these are "a legitimate form of cultural celebration."[163] While 57% of Protestant respondents selected "Agree" or "Strongly agree," only 24% of Catholic respondents chose those options, while 51% selected "Disagree" or "Strongly disagree." This split in results shows that such ethnonational rituals and symbols continue to be contentious today, demonstrating their continued relevance in NI. Furthermore, these responses show that a

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[160] Here, the contributor uses a derogatory term for Sinn Féin supporters, highlighting a level of animosity towards them. This is indicative of in-group/out-group relations, where such examples of out-group derogation can be used to maintain a positive sense of social identity for the in-group. See: Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior." In *Political psychology*, (Psychology Press, 2004), 283-284.

[161] O'Hanlon, Eilis. "Why Sinn Fein needs to forget about unity and focus on Brexit." *Belfast Telegraph.* December 5, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/news-analysis/why-sinn-fein-needs-to-forget-about-unity-and-focus-on-brexit/35267097.html

[162] Hall, Amanda. "Vanity of the bonfires? Eleventh night bonfires and loyalist influence after negotiated settlement in Northern Ireland." *Terrorism and political violence* 35, no. 8 (2023): 1753-1774.

[163] ARK, "How much do you agree or disagree with each of these statements about July and August bonfires in Northern Ireland?
Bonfires are a legitimate form of cultural celebration." ark.ac.uk, accessed January 13, 2024, https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2016/Community_Relations/BONLEGIT.html

majority of Protestant respondents consider a ritual involving the burning of Catholic/Nationalist/Irish symbols to be a form of their cultural expression. This indicates the presence of out-group derogation, as described by Tajfel and Turner. By burning the out-group's symbols, these bonfires symbolically demean the out-group, reinforcing a feeling of unity and superiority among unionist participants as members of the "in-group." This reveals the continuation of in-group/out-group dynamics, split along ethnonational lines.

Sub-theme 4.2: Language use as a marker of identity:

Eric Hobsbawm describes the link between language and national identity. While he contends that the case for a standard language was initially not a cultural matter, he describes that, in a post-colonial context, formerly colonised regions can assert their nationhood and independence by incorporating their indigenous language into national education and culture.[164] Therefore, one way for nationalist media to assert Irish nationalism would be through using the indigenous Irish language.

This notion is evident throughout articles from the *Belfast Telegraph* and the *Irish News*. The *Belfast Telegraph* always anglicises Sinn Féin to "Sinn Fein," while the *Irish News* always employs its Irish spelling. The use of Irish spelling in the *Irish News* indicates a desire to assert Irish nationhood and recall Irish language as an aspect of Irish national identity. Meanwhile, the anglicising of this Irish name in the *Belfast Telegraph* reflects this newspaper's preference to assert British aspects of identity. While both newspapers have become more neutrally positioned over time, including articles tackling various opinions and written by contributors of various affiliations, this discrepancy in spelling indicates the legacy of strict ethnonational divisions from the past on media today.

Another linguistic divergence is found in the way in which contributors to each newspaper describe their relationship to the UK. In the *Irish News*, NI's connection with the rest of the UK is downplayed as contributors refer to NI as "the north." This linguistic choice implies a conceptualisation of NI as just one part of the island of Ireland, subtly reinforcing the idea of a close association with the ROI and thereby downplaying NI's status as a constituent part of the UK. This linguistic choice is evident in the following extracts:

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[164] Hobsbawm, Eric, "Language, Culture, and National Identity." *Social Research* 63, no. 4 (1996): 1071.

"In just a matter of weeks, politics in the north may be contemplating an entirely new beginning." (*Irish News*, John Manley, 29-12-2016)[165]

In the following extract this is coupled with an assertion that NI's place within the UK is fragile, further cementing the associations with the term "the north."

"The north's future within the so-called UK has never been more fragile and it's all to play for." (*Irish News*, Letters to the Editor, Anne Quinn, Belfast, 08-12-2016)[166]

While the *Belfast Telegraph* contributors tend to employ language emphasising the unity of the UK, they do also use slang specific to NI. Examples of these are:

"Looking at my trusty Disingenuous *Blethering*-English Dictionary" (*Belfast Telegraph*, Columnist, Matthew Norman, 06-12-2016)[167]

"I really wish I could go. What are *youse* going to wear?" (*Belfast Telegraph*, Columnist, Lindy McDowell, 21-12-2016)[168]

Although the origins of these terms cannot be definitively traced to NI, they are described in media as having Irish and Scottish influences and thus represent a distinct way of speaking outside of standardised English.[169] Imagined Communities describes the importance of shared identity markers such as traditions in reinforcing a sense of collective identity.[170] The fact that contributors to the *Belfast Telegraph* frequently employ this slang reveals its potential as a shared linguistic phenomenon which has the potential to act as such a shared identity

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[165] Manley, John. "A new beginning for the north's politics in 2017." *Irish News*. December 29, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/columnists/2016/12/29/news/headline-852487/
[166] Quinn, Anne. "North's future in UK has never been more fragile." *Irish News*. December 8, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/08/news/social-segregation-made-worse-by-academic-selection-at-11-824712/
[167] Norman, Matthew. "Theresa May visits Bahrain: You don't get to be world's second biggest arms exporter by being picky about who you sell arms to." *Belfast Telegraph*. December 6, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/theresa-may-visits-bahrain-you-dont-get-to-be-worlds-second-biggest-arms-exporter-by-being-picky-about-who-you-sell-arms-to/35273017.html
[168] McDowell, Lindy. "Oh yes they did! It's the Stormont pantomime 2016. Cinder-Arlene and the Ghost of Biomass Past." *Belfast Telegraph*. December 21, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/lindy-mcdowell/oh-yes-they-did-its-the-stormont-pantomime-2016-cinder-arlene-and-the-ghost-of-biomass-past/35310095.html
[169] For discussion surrounding the Irish origin of "youse," see: McClelland, Edward, "Here's hoping all youse enjoy this," Chicago Tribune, chicagotribune.com, accessed February 22, 2024, https://www.chicagotribune.com/2017/02/06/heres-hoping-all-youse-enjoy-this/ .
For discussion surrounding the Scottish origin of "blethering," see: The Scotsman, "Scottish word of the week: blether," scotsman.com, accessed February 22, 2024, https://www.scotsman.com/news/scottish-word-of-the-week-blether-1567604
[170] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. Revised Edition.* (Verso, 2006): 6.

marker for people across ethnonational affiliation in NI. This could indicate a shift towards the conditions needed to facilitate the formation of a new imagined civic community, perhaps in the form of "Northern Irishness."

Nonetheless, language choices in these extracts continue to highlight divergent perceptions of NI's place in the UK. While contributors to the *Irish News* use language to undermine NI's connection to the UK, other contributors use anglicised language to demonstrate alignment with Britishness. This reflects a lack of consensus on NI's position *vis-à-vis* the ROI and the UK based on Irishness and Britishness, indicating that these dimensions of identity still shape people's perspectives in NI.

Sub-theme 4.3: Religiosity represents a point of contention in NI:

Some scholars warn against treating the conflict in NI as a religious conflict between Catholic and Protestant communities. For example, Joanne McEvoy emphasises that, where Catholic and Protestant identity categories are referred to, it is only to represent the respective beliefs of ROI being "the motherland" versus Britain being the "patron state."[171] However, other scholars contend that NI is "a place where religion and ethno-national identity elide," with religious beliefs and practices constituting part of ethnonational conceptualisation.[172] Therefore, debates surrounding religion are relevant to topics surrounding ethnonational affiliation. In both newspapers, contributors reveal the contentious nature of religion in NI.

For example, in the *Belfast Telegraph*, a series of letters are published in which the contributor Reverend John Gray debates the position of another contributor, Alf McCreary, who had accused him of bigotry. Gray responds in the following extract:

> "[When the Pope visits NI you should ask him] to explain why on one of the walls of the church of the Jesuits in Rome there is a unique plaster cast [depicting the founder of the Jesuit movement] with his foot in the neck of Protestantism. I am sure every Protestant in NI would love to know about this plaster cast." (*Belfast Telegraph*, Letters to the Editor, John Gray, 14-12-2016)[173]

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[171] McEvoy, Joanne. *Politics of Northern Ireland*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2008): 6.

[172] Brewer, John D., and Bernadette C. Hayes. "The quality of mercy: how religion and ethno-nationalism influence attitudes towards amnesty in Northern Ireland." *Democratic Audit Blog* (2016): 2.

[173] Gray, John. "There are important questions for Pope Francis to answer." *Belfast Telegraph*. December 14, 2016. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/letters/there-are-important-questions-for-pope-francis-to-answer/35290920.html

Meanwhile, one extract from the *Irish News* exhibits a mocking tone to the perceived discomfort among Protestants surrounding a Papal visit:

> "Nearly everyone has been positive about the prospect of a Papal visit to Armagh in 2018 but there have been a few slightly strangulated Protestant responses, of which a personal favourite is from the Rev Trevor Gribben, Clerk of the Presbyterian General Assembly." (*Irish News*, Columnist, Newton Emerson, 03-12-2016)[174]

These extracts demonstrate that religion still represents a contentious topic in NI, with contributors debating the nuances of their different denominations of Christianity. Furthermore, the Papal visit is presented as an event that will elicit discomfort from Protestants in NI. Since religion elides with ethnonational identity in NI, these extracts suggest a continuation of ethnonational division, where arguments between Protestants and Catholics serve as manifestations of their broader ethnonational identities: Protestant/Unionist/British; and Catholic/Nationalist/Irish.

However, several articles in the *Irish News* call for religious and political leaders to set aside sectarian debates. Discussing the Papal visit again, one contributor calls for the following:

> "It should be the duty of senior clerics, Protestant and Catholic alike, to ensure the Pope is guided away from the quagmire of DUP Irish sectarian constitutional politics." (*Irish News*, Letters to the Editor, Michael Gillepsie, Kilfennan, Co Derry, 13-12-2016)[175]

The following extract also demonstrates a desire to transcend sectarian debates, advocating for abandoning old divides in favour of finding common ground among all Christians. This call for improving relations among different Christian denominations is depicted as particularly needed in NI, reflecting the perspective that NI remains particularly entrenched by sectarian division:

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[174] Emerson, Newton. "Still no clarity on Stormont heating fiasco." *Irish News*. December 3, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/columnists/2016/12/03/news/newton-emerson-still-no-clarity-on-stormont-heating-fiasco-814252/

[175] Gillespie, Michael. "Nationalists' position at Stormont still unclear." *Irish News*. December 13, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/13/news/nationalists-position-at-stormont-still-unclear-832672/

"Surely in Northern Ireland, of all places on earth, there should be an outpouring of support for the Catholic and Lutheran Churches exorcising the demons of old religious bigotry, intolerance and disrespect? These demons terribly wounded the Body of Christ, needlessly distorting mutual faith in the central truth of Christianity." (*Irish News*, Letters to the Editor, Sean McManus, 09-12-2016)[176]

Overall, this sub-theme demonstrates that religion is still seen as a contentious topic for many contributors. There are indications that some contributors wish to move beyond sectarian divides, evident in their calls on clerical leaders and the people to try to avoid sectarian politics where possible, advocating for unity and reconciliation among people of different Christian denominations. However, those advocating for unity also acknowledge that sectarian division persists in NI. Given that religion elides with ethnonationalist identity in NI, the evidence of religious divide throughout these extracts also suggests the persistence of ethnonational divide.

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[176] McManus, Sean. "Historical ecumenical progress has been ignored in Ireland." *Irish News.* December 9, 2016. https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2016/12/09/news/historical-ecumenical-progress-has-been-ignored-in-ireland-826572/

6. Conclusion:

Academic analysis of NI's society and conflict has typically employed an ethnonationalist lens.[177] This approach is predicated on the assumption that NI's identity landscape consists of two distinct ethnonational groups: Irish/National/Catholics and British/Unionist/Protestants. However, scholars like Hall and Bhabha contend that identity is fluid and changeable, suggesting that factors such as cultural influences and changes lead to a continual re-negotiation of identities, and potentially hybridisation of identity.[178] Therefore, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, this thesis evaluates whether ethnonationalist identity continues to be relevant and whether there are indications of emerging hybrid identification.

Contributors to the opinion sections of the *Irish News* and the *Belfast Telegraph* agree that Brexit has destabilised NI's peace process, describing how the relative level of peace achieved since the GFA is threatened by Brexit's ramifications. Furthermore, contributors agree that Brexit has highlighted the UK authorities' incompetence, characterised by their ignorance towards NI's situation. This underscores a collective recognition of the significance of peace in NI and a shared anxiety about Brexit provoking a return to ethnonational violence.

Despite consensus that the referendum has reignited border debates, there are discrepancies between how this is discussed. Contributors from the *Irish News* consider it likely a border poll will be held and will result in a vote for a united Ireland. In contrast, a known anti-nationalist *Belfast Telegraph* columnist mockingly characterises this sentiment as naïve and misinformed. Given the Irish Nationalist roots of the *Irish News,* this discrepancy in tone indicates the persistence of an ethnonational divide, which influences how contributors discuss such topics. Furthermore, the concept of "Imagined Communities" suggests that communities are constructed based on the perception of a shared future.[179] Therefore, this discrepancy in how contributors to each newspaper envision NI's future indicates that Imagined Communities in the region may still be constructed along ethnonational lines.

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[177] McGrattan, Cillian. "Explaining Northern Ireland? The Limitations of the Ethnic Conflict Model." *National Identities* 12, no. 2 (June 2010): 186.

[178] Bhabha, Homi K. *The location of culture*. (Routledge, 2012): 1-3; Hall, Stuart, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity," in *Questions of cultural identity,* ed. Grossberg, Lawrence, Stuart Hall, and Paul Du Gay (SAGE Publications, 1996): 6.

[179] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. Revised Edition.* (Verso, 2006): 6.

Evidence of the continued relevance of ethnonationalism also emerges in discussions surrounding Stormont. Contributors to the *Irish News* demonstrate a pattern of criticising SF's actions in Stormont as insufficiently nationalist, indicating a desire among these contributors for Irish nationalism to be adequately represented at a governmental level. This suggests their continued alignment with Irish/Nationalist/Catholic interests. Furthermore, discussions surrounding ethno-symbols still present them as sensitive identity markers for people in NI. These discussions assume a continued ethnonational divide in NI, and align with SIT's conceptualisation of in-group/out-group dynamics wherein rejecting the out-group's ethno-symbols is a way of asserting positive in-group identity and cohesion.[180] Moreover, the continued concerns regarding Stormont's funding of organisations with paramilitary ties indicate that contributors believe ethnonationalism continues to shape the political sphere in NI. Paramilitarism remains a prominent and contentious issue for them, indicating continued ethnonational tensions within society in NI.

However, discussions surrounding concerns about paramilitary ties also reveal contributors' aspiration for Stormont to move away from such ethnonational divides. Contributors are generally suspicious of Stormont's continued covert promotion of ethnonational interests, a promotion which they consider possible due to cronyism between the DUP and SF. A range of contributors also advocate for the resolution of legacy cases, framing this as necessary for societal progress. This theme further underscores contributors' will to transcend ethnonational divisions.

Overall, this thesis did not uncover any clear evidence of hybrid conceptualisations of identity emerging among contributors in this post-referendum period. This could indicate that identity categories do not necessarily shift rapidly or immediately following a transformative event such as Brexit, reflecting the resilience of historical identity dynamics in the face of sudden changes. However, it is apparent that contributors feel a heightened level of frustration with the enduring relevance of ethnonationalism, particularly within Stormont. Contributors advocate for a departure from ethnonationalist divide and a prioritisation of maintaining peace in NI during Brexit. These opinions could pave the way for more hybrid forms of identity in the future. Immediate reactions to this transformative event only

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[180] Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior." In *Political psychology*, (Psychology Press, 2004), 283.

represent an early snapshot of the evolution of identity dynamics surrounding Brexit. Therefore, further research could explore whether these frustrations ultimately translated into tangible shifts towards hybrid identification in the years following the referendum.

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