



# The British Self and Continental Other: The Question of British National Identity in the 2016 Referendum

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## Abstract

The Brexit, UK's withdrawal from the EU in 2020 was a pivotal moment in the history of Europe. The United Kingdom and the European Union have a longstanding relationship, which dates to 1973; however, against all expectations, in a referendum on June 23, 2016, more than 51.9% of the British people voted to leave the EU. Certain scholars believe that the British national identity was one of the sources of the UK hostility toward a European integration. An important question to discuss regarding this hostility is: how did the unique formation of the British identity drive the majority of people to vote in favour of leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum? This question is investigated in this research through the theoretical framework of the Social Identity Theory. Relying on a qualitative methodology, data was gathered from various survey polls, such as Ipsos MORI, Eurobarometer and British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys. Findings indicate that the British identity has not been Europeanised as much as other European countries yet, and that Britain's weak sense of European identity was a key contributor to the Brexit vote.

**Keywords:** Brexit, European Union, Euroscepticism, National Identity, Self/other, Social Identity Theory, United Kingdom

## 1. Introduction

Identity has both a strong unifying power, and a strong dividing power. The problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the problem of ‘othering’. Almost every global, national, and regional conflict is organised around the various dimensions of group-based identities. Therefore, understanding the underlying process of identity formation could expand our knowledge about the underlying layers of group-based relations and help in understanding people’s voting behaviours and inclinations.

Brexit is an abbreviation for ‘British exit,’ referring to the UK’s decision to leave the European Union (EU) in 2020. Most of the previous research has focused on the correlation between people’s vote and their sense of national identity, and numerous analysis have indicated that people’s sense of national identity was significantly associated with their vote choice (Curtice, 2016). Therefore, what is already known about Brexit is that there is clearly a link between how people voted in the EU referendum, and their sense of national identity.

This study, however, attempts to understand the way in which the British national identity has been shaped based on Self/Other relationships, and the way in which this identity formation has led to the majority of the population to vote for leaving the EU. Through an investigation of social identity construction and its relation to political action, this study aims to illustrate the way in which the British national identity was constructed, why this identity construction created problems for its Europeanisation, and how it affected the British people’s opinion regarding the Brexit. More precisely, this study tries to answer the following question: How did the unique formation of the British identity drive the majority of the British people to vote in favour of leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum?

This study also attempts to add other considerations that contribute to explaining the results of the referendum. This objective will be fulfilled by examining the way in which these identities are shaped in the United Kingdom. Therefore, this study explores the leave vote, with a special focus on national identity as a kind of social identity.

Brexit has highlighted how differently the British define themselves from most continentals. It has been said that Britain is a European country, but it is not European enough. According to certain studies (Marcussen, Risse, Engelmann-Martin, Knopf, & Roscher, 2001), there has always been a detachment between Britain and the rest of the Continent, meaning that Europe has always been portrayed as Britain's 'other'. Public opinion and the Eurosceptic stance of much of the British press often project the EU as the hostile 'other'. Therefore, the Self/Other nexus is a pertinent framework for investigating the British vision of Europe as well as their national identity construction.

The method used in this study emphasises the significant link that exists between the data related to 'Brexit'. It also uses case studies to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific context. This study takes the form of a qualitative case-study, where the case is the Brexit referendum that took place on June 2016. A case study can be used to describe the characteristics of a particular subject, in this case, the Brexit.

Moreover, due to the nature of the study and its limitations, this article has relied on surveys and secondary sources as its source of data. Common examples of secondary research include research material published in textbooks, encyclopaedias, news articles, and research reports. When conducting secondary research, authors may draw data from published academic papers, government

documents, statistical databases, and historical records in order to conduct a secondary analysis of archived data sets. This research will use data related to ‘Brexit’, through the following sources:

**Eurobarometer data:** Eurobarometer was established in 1974. Since that time, the Eurobarometer has asked EU citizens whether their country’s membership is a ‘bad thing’ or a ‘good thing’. Moreover, since 1992, Eurobarometer has started to ask people throughout the European Union to state whether they see themselves as their nationality only, their nationality AND European, European AND their nationality, or European only. Therefore, Eurobarometer data can be used as a vehicle for tracking opinion in the European Community.

**Ipsos MORI data:** the Ipsos MORI data dates to 1989. Polling data from Ipsos MORI has some of the best available time-series data available on ‘the most important issue’. Ipsos MORI conducts a monthly poll and asks respondents to name the most important issue that comes to their mind. Unlike the other survey questions mentioned here, respondents are not prompted with particular topics. Instead, they simply reply with answers that first come to their mind.

The data was primarily gathered through online academic databases, libraries and their online databases; data from other relevant sources and reports are also mentioned and discussed when relevant.

Thus, the study will first explore the construction of the British identity according to the Social Identity Theory, and then examine how the Leave campaign targeted the underlying process of identity formation and oriented the majority of votes accordingly.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory**

Social identity processes tend to play an increasingly important role in today's social and political landscape. Accordingly, Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a useful theoretical framework that could be applied to a wide range of groups, including those linked to politics. This paper intends to examine the construction of the British national identity according to the Social Identity theoretical framework. Social Identity Theory is a theory that affected the concept of social identity and put it in the focus of social psychology. It is a solid theoretical framework that has had broad applications across several academic disciplines in recent years.

In 1986, British psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner introduced the Social Identity Theory, according to which our 'social identity' within a group shapes our norms, attitudes and behaviours. The theory suggests that the groups which we belonged to (e.g., family, football team, social class, and nation) give us a sense of social identity and a sense of belonging to the social world. Thus, social identity is 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). The Social Identity Theory entails three major components: social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison (Ellemers, 2019).

### **2. 1. Social Categorisation**

Social categorisation happens at the subconscious level. One of the key insights of SIT is that the categorisation of everyday objects can be extended to explain the categorisation of people (Huddy, 2001). We can group people according to different categories (such

as race, age, gender, ethnicity, economic status and nationality). Social categorisation is a natural cognitive process, through which people place individuals into different social groups. It refers to people's tendency to perceive themselves and others in terms of their particular social categories, and implies that people are defined and understood not only as individuals, but also as belonging to certain social categories.

Through the social categorisation process, people categorise themselves as belonging to certain social groups. Social identity then leads individuals to categorise themselves and other salient groups into 'us' versus 'them'. This social group is more or less salient in a certain context. However, further processes are initiated only if psychological salience exists. A sociological categorisation only gains psychological significance once it has been accepted as self-defining. After that, we decide which social group people belong to: 'in-group' or 'out-group'.

Social categorisation occurs whenever we think about others in terms of their category memberships, rather than on the basis of more personal information about them. Consequently, the process of social categorisation generally leads to the formation of stereotypes and prejudices towards members of other groups.

## 2. 2. Social Identification

Social categorisation is followed by social identification, where individuals adopt the identity of a group and adjust their behaviour accordingly. With a sense of identification, intergroup emotions are generated by belonging to, or deriving identity from, one type of social group vs another. Research indicates that when social identities are salient, group stereotyping and prejudice are more likely to happen. Strongly identifying in-group members are less

likely to include an outsider, in order to protect their group identity (Curley, 2009). Accordingly, identification with an in-group based on a common cause leads to prejudice and animosity.

### **2. 3. Social Comparison**

An individual's social identity depends on two processes: recognising his/her similarities with his/her in-group, and perceptions of diversity compared to members of other groups. Thus, through social comparison, people evaluate their salient in-group relatives to relevant out-groups.

Categorisation emphasises the similarities of people within the same category, as well as the diversities of members of other groups. Tajfel and Turner (1986a, p. 16) find, 'pressures to evaluate one's own group positively through in-group/out-group comparisons lead social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other'. Positive distinctiveness describes the result of social comparison. If the in-group is evaluated more positively than the out-group, people perceive positive distinctiveness.

Groups are an important source of pride and self-esteem. We need to have a positive attitude and feeling about the groups to which we belong, since we need to have a positive feeling about ourselves. When we categorise people into separate groups, people tend to generate an in-group bias because they have a natural need for high self-esteem. Tajfel and Turner (1986) argue that self-esteem is at the core of social identity. Therefore, group members compare their group favourably against other groups to maintain their self-esteem. This explains prejudice and discrimination, since a group tends to view members of competing groups negatively to increase self-esteem.

### **3. Brexit and Social Identity Theory**

According to literature, the British identity played a crucial role in the Brexit referendum in various ways. This paper therefore first examines the way in which Britain's national identity has been constructed according to different Social Identity Theory processes, such as social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison. It will then analyse the effects of this British national identity on the British people's vote in the 2016 referendum.

#### **3. 1. Social Categorisation**

From a Social Psychology perspective, an approach to identity should start by making a distinction between 'self' and 'other'. Moreover, drawn mainly from a social constructivist discourse, the question of 'others' or the distinction between 'us' and 'them' is important for distinguishing group boundaries and identity formation (Olausson, 2010, p. 143). Accordingly, the national identity of the in-group only contains meaning when contrasted with the national identities of other out-groups. As a result, the existence of Others affects and shapes the identity of the Self (Milliken, 1999). Consequently, the Self/Other nexus is a pertinent framework for looking at how ideas about Europe are constructed and how British national identity is produced. For instance, elements such as history and geography can be considered to be the reasons for which Britain sets itself apart and the basis for the 'othering' of Europe. Therefore, the framing of 'others,' according to the UK's unique history and geography is important to investigate in this context.

##### **3. 1. 1. Geography**

Being an island nation, there has been a detachment between



Britain and the rest of the Continent, and there has not been a change in this conception since the accession of the UK to the EU. As a result, Europe has always been portrayed as Britain's 'other'.

Britain is physically separated from Europe; this is a rather significant reason for the separation of the British people from Europeans (Dewey, 2009, p. 30). Therefore, the British identity has formed directly from the idea of freedom from the mainland (Colley, 1992), and there has always been a sense of separation between Britain and its continental neighbours. For instance, in his famous Bloomberg speech, David Cameron (2013) emphasised the importance of the UK's geography in shaping public attitudes toward the EU:

Our geography has shaped our psychology. We have the character of an island nation – independent, forthright, passionate in defence of our sovereignty. We can no more change this British sensibility than we can drain the English Channel. And because of this sensibility, we come to the European Union with a frame of mind that is more practical than emotional. For us, the European Union is a means to an end – prosperity, stability, the anchor of freedom and democracy both within Europe and beyond her shores – not an end in itself.

As Curley (2009) argues, Britishness has always been characterised by its separation from a European identity, and the deep cultural history of independence from the European Continent has had a crucial impact on the development of the British identity. The UK's geography can therefore be considered as one of the most important factors in shaping the British identity, and consequently public attitudes towards the EU.

### 3. 1. 2. History

History is closely linked to the formation and meaning of a national identity because it tells a story of where a nation and its people come from, as well as its place and role in relation to other nations. Therefore, a key function of history is to provide nations with an in-group foundation and origin. In fact, social representations of history provide individuals, as group members, with a sense of positive social esteem and in-group attachment.

Thus, it is essential to note that the UK history made it impossible for Britain to be an enthusiastic member of the European Union. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the UK had become the strongest colonial power and the first industrial state in the world. Moreover, from the Battle of Waterloo to WWII, victories in European clashes established a still-potent national identity for the islanders, who stood tall against Europeans. Therefore, the danger has always come from across the Channel, the Continent, and each of these moments expresses some assertion of British sovereignty against a foreign invader.

The self-image that the Brexit campaign portrayed during the referendum has heavily relied on the UK's past. In fact, the idea about the past has influenced people's feelings about their identity in the present, as well as their political views and decisions. Therefore, understanding the country's historical context is important in understanding the underlying process of the British people's identity formation and their consequent voting behaviours. The following paragraphs explain some of the most important incidents in the British history, which have had a significant influence on shaping the self-image of Britain.

### **3. 1. 2. 1. The Norman Conquest**

The Norman Conquest is the most famous date in the British history. In fact, the Norman Conquest was the last successful invasion of Britain from the Continent in 1066, and despite serious threats over the centuries, such as the Spanish Armada, Napoleonic wars and the Nazi threat, the country has since been able to preserve its independence from the Continent. However, Hugh Gaitskell (1962), in his famous speech, stated that joining the EEC would be ‘the end of a thousand years of history’. Such mentality has been ingrained in the mind of many British people. For instance, Booker (2016) argues that the UK is one of the greatest countries by stating that ‘We sometimes tend to forget that we live in what, for 1,000 years, has been one of the most extraordinary, wonderful, inspiring countries in all human history’.

Furthermore, as Cameron (2016) states, ‘We are special, different, unique. We have the character of an island nation which has not been invaded for almost a thousand years, and which has built institutions which have endured for centuries’. Even Nigel Farage chose to wear a tie depicting the Bayeux tapestry while campaigning and explained that ‘the last time we were invaded and taken over’ was the Norman Conquest. As a result, 1066 has been framed as one of the most important dates in the British history, and these thousand years have since been the source of superiority in the self-image of the British people in the following years.

### **3. 1. 2. 2. Reformation and Henry VIII’s Break with Rome**

The genesis of national consciousness for Britain dates to the 16<sup>th</sup>, when English nationalism started to grow. The awakening of the English national consciousness came with Henry VIII, who is

recognized as the founder of the modern English nation. In fact, English nationalism was seeded when King Henry VIII declared England an empire after breaking with Rome, and sparked the English Reformation.

The reason for which Henry VIII intended to break from Rome is rooted in the his appeal for male heir to continue the Tudor line. However, his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, could not bear him a male heir. Meanwhile, to obtain an annulment of his marriage, he needed papal approval for the annulment. Henry had asked Pope Clement VII for his marriage to Catherine to end, which was refused by the Pope. Therefore, he decided to break from Rome in 1533 and finally declared himself as the Supreme Head of the Church in England.

The Reformation is one of the most transformative events in the history of Britain. This decision profoundly impacted the British national identity formation and created a national identity, clearly separate from the Continent. Thus, the English Reformation dramatically transformed the relationship with the rest of Europe and changed this country forever. As David Starkey (2018) argues, ‘Nobody before Henry would make any argument about England being much different from the rest of Europe. It was Henry who turns England into a defensible island, who literally fortifies the English coastline. It really is Henry that turns England into a genuine island’. As a result, the Reformation sowed the seeds of Euroscepticism in Britain.

Today, the Reformation is rebranded as ‘the first Brexit’, because Britain decided to reject any foreign authority within England and detached itself from a large supra-national institution that had once exercised a powerful influence over its affairs (Smith, 2020). Moreover, this formation of national consciousness brought

a new attitude of superiority to the English people. As a result, the Tudor king's break with Rome in 1533 established the idea of English exceptionalism and consequently paved the way for the 2016 Brexit referendum.

### **3. 1. 2. 3. The British Empire**

Britain's geopolitical position as an island favoured the development of the British naval power and offered a degree of protection from continental warfare. Developing its naval mastery brought the British influence to new heights. During the well-known 'golden age', after Elizabeth I defeated a Spanish invasion fleet in 1588, her kingdom turned its eyes to the sea and became a maritime power rather than continental one.

The history of the UK and the European Continent has always been interconnected through wars and trade in particular. However, Britain maritime power encouraged Britain to look far beyond Europe for trade and influence, which gave rise to the creation of an empire that spanned the globe. Consequently, between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the British Empire acquired a substantial amount of territory and became the largest Empire in history: approximately 25% of the earth's landmass was in control of the British, and the region was so extensive that at any one time, there was daylight in one of the territories. In fact, the English territories were so extensive that the phrase 'The Empire on which the sun never sets' has been used to explain the vastness of the British Empire (Misachi, 2018). Therefore, the British were able to establish themselves as one of the most powerful empires on the planet, which has had had tangible effects on the British national identity.

As Dewey (2009, p. 30) explains, Brits have built their uniqueness on several grounds. For many, the very soul of the Great Britain was built on the history of the Empire, and even though it was in the past, the magnitude of what they achieved set them apart from other European countries. Empire was seen as a means of denying closer links to Europe and again highlighting a sense of British separateness from the Continent. Therefore, the rise of the British Empire during the nineteenth century reinforced the sense of superiority.

Furthermore, the history and sense of self-identity that the colonial status brought with it are still largely ingrained in the British people's minds. Therefore, there has always been a sense of Empirical Greatness in the self-image of the Brits. As Dorling and Tomlinson (2019) explain, today's grandparents 'knew' without thinking about it that up to 1947, Britain was in control of some 700 million people in an empire stretching around the world, and most of them believed that this was a 'good thing'. Interestingly, according to referendum results, this is one of the evident common characteristics among those who voted Leave: they were English voters, mostly older, many of whom are likely to remember the golden days of the Empire.

As a result, during the referendum, Britain's mainstream national identity narrative relied on glorifying the British Empire (Beaumont, 2019); there are indeed several references to the older 'frames' of glory and the British Empire, used specifically to evoke emotions and instil pride within people. Thus, the emphasis on imperial nostalgia was a core engine of the Leave vote, and for certain leave voters, Brexit was considered as an opportunity to restore Britain's place in the world as a great power.

### **3. 1. 2. 4. The Industrial Revolution**

Naval power was crucial in allowing Britain to seize the trade routes and colonies, and helped Britain provide raw materials and fund the Industrial Revolution (Miller, 2012). Directly related to the expansion of the British Empire, the Industrial Revolution began in Great Britain in the 1780s and soon spread to other Western nations. This Revolution greatly contributed to changes in people's lifestyle across the world, and Britain, as the first country in the Industrial Revolution, came to be known as the 'workshop of the world'.

Later, the era of the modern world's fair began with Britain's Great Exhibition (formally, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations; often called the Crystal palace exhibition), held in London's Hyde Park in 1851 (Findling, 2018). It was the first World's Fair Exhibition with a focus on industry and culture. This massive trade show displayed the latest British inventions, as well as artefacts from around the world. Interestingly, although the Exhibition was intended to be a platform on which countries worldwide could display their industrial achievements, Great Britain was a dominant force and occupied the Exhibition's entire western section, which was targeted to demonstrate Britain's superiority. Thus, this display of 'otherness' contributed to the emerging British identity as it contrasted Britain as more civilised, progressive and thus superior to other states (Grasme, 2018). This new sense of national identity and civic pride resulted in significantly rising nationalism among the British.

### **3. 1. 2. 5. The Second World War**

The Second World War had a significant impact on the British

attitude towards Europe after 1945. It continues, in many ways, to play a major role in the same debate today. According to Davis (2017), the story of the Second World War was one of heroic resistance and final victory for Britain; the British distinct sense of ‘otherness’ was reinforced by the fact that the UK was one of the only European states, which had not been occupied during the war. Even Clement Attlee told one newspaper: ‘I’m not very keen on the Common Market. After all, we beat Germany, and we beat Italy, and we saved France and Belgium and Holland. I never see why we should go crawling to them’ (Heath, 1998, p. 355). The memories of World War Two are still central to many Britons’ self-image. Britain’s role in World War II was a source for re-imagination of their identity. After the war, British pride centred around the feeling that they were the ones who had defeated the Nazis, which nourished a feeling of uniqueness. Thus, the Second World War victory became a source for British self-understanding and pride (Dewey, 2009, p. 36).

For many historians, World War Two had the most enduring influence on Britain’s self-image (Wilson, 2014). For instance, the moment that the UK stood alone against Adolf Hitler is still resonating strongly in the self-image of British people, and even Boris Johnson (Ross, 2016) compared the European project to Hitler’s attempt at territorial domination and emphasised that, as in 1940, Britain can, and should, stand alone. Furthermore, when questioned about whether Britain could manage the chaos of a divorce with Europe, Brexit Secretary David Davis recalled the Blitz spirit and said: ‘Our civil service can cope with World War Two, they can easily cope with this’. These examples demonstrate the origins of Britain’s distanced attitude towards the rest of the Continent, and illustrate the way in which Britain’s self-image as a great power has been shaped according to its unique history and geography.



Scholars have long noted the importance of Othering in the formation of identity. The Leave campaign used Othering as a political tool in the Brexit Referendum; British politicians extensively used the framing of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ in their discourse to increase the sense of national identity in people. Furthermore, it has always been revealing that the British media talk about ‘Europe’ as if it is a place apart, and it cannot be denied that a large part of the population does not feel European. Hence, the EU’s negative image in the UK had a significant impact on the referendum outcomes.

### **3. 2. Social Identification**

#### **3. 2. 1. British Identity and European Identity**

The notion of European identity was created long before the start of the European Union; however, in the context of the European integration after the Second World War, the creation of a European identity was first introduced by one of the leading thinkers on European integration, Ernest Haas. Haas (1964) explained that the development of the EU as a neofunctionalist strategy intended to promote identities beyond the nation-state in order to limit the possibility of conflict.

Moreover, according to Saurugger (2014, p. 155), the EU itself worked consciously on the creation of a European identity that can unite people across Europe. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that a reasonably high degree of shared identity among the individuals living within that union is required to hold a political union together. Accordingly, a certain degree of identification with the EU must be present for citizens to consider the EU political system as legitimate. As a result, the future of the European Union,

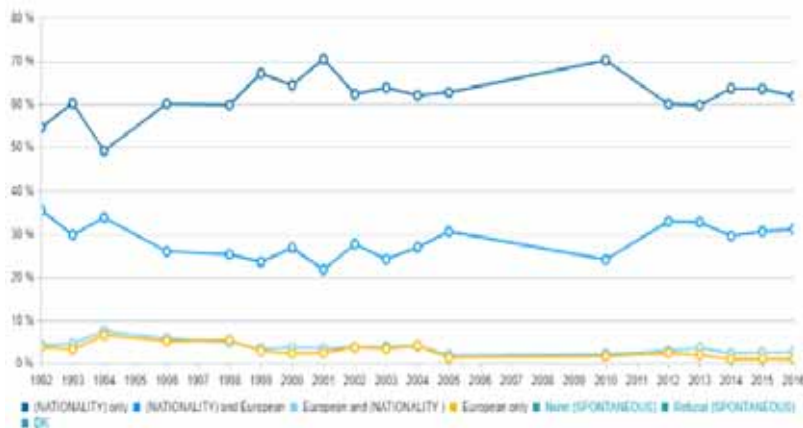
to some extent, would be determined by the degree to which citizens of the member states could identify themselves as citizens of Europe more broadly. The question that is raised here is: How can people identify themselves as citizens of Europe?

As mentioned before, during an identity formation process, whether it be European or national, the exclusion of the 'Other' is necessary. Therefore, the question to be posed here is: Can people have both national and European identities at the same time?

According to the Social Identity Theory, people can categorise themselves into different groups, which give them a sense of social identity. They can have different social identifications in different social contexts. As a result, it is possible for people to identify both with a subordinate (British) and superordinate (European) category. However, the extent to which people identify themselves with these groups is crucial. For instance, people in Britain may identify themselves as British only, European only, or both British and European. As a result, according to the level of identification measured by the in-group identification scale, people may feel different degrees of national identifications with regard to Europe, ranging from exclusive national identity (nationality only) to dual national identity (nationality and European).

Therefore, in order to measure the level of identification with the European Union, over two decades, Eurobarometer has asked people throughout the European Union that in the near future: 'Do you see yourself as 1) [nationality] only, 2) [nationality] and European, 3) European and [nationality], or 4) European only?' (Figure 1).

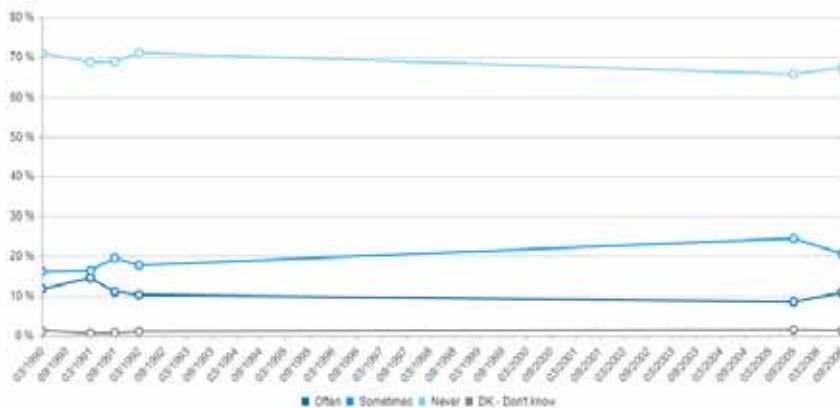
**Figure 1:** the level of national identification with the EU, 1992-2016



Source: Eurobarometer, 2015

The Eurobarometer data revealed that in the UK, the levels of identification as [nationality] only is higher than European only. This indicates a higher level of exclusive national identity in the UK. Moreover, Eurobarometer has asked people: ‘Do you ever think of yourself as not only (British), but also European? Does this happen often, sometimes or never?’ (Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** British vs European identification, 1990-2006



Source: Eurobarometer, 2015

These data indicate that exclusive national identity is higher than dual (nationality and European) identity in the UK. The reason for this inclination toward national identity may be found in the fact that, as argued by the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), in order to develop, European identity must contribute to positive aspects of people's social identity. Thus, many authors have stressed the importance of national context for understanding the greater or lesser difficulty of developing European identity and pro-European attitudes in general.

According to Dennison and Carl (2016), the percentage of the population with an exclusively national self-identity is higher in the UK than all other EU member states. They attribute this exclusive British identity to specific aspects of the country, such as history and geography (Dennison & Carl, 2016). Britain's focus on keeping its nation and its national identity separate from Europe comes from several reasons. However, one of the most obvious reasons is that the British identity, especially its ethnic conceptions, is partly constructed on British people's separation from Europe.

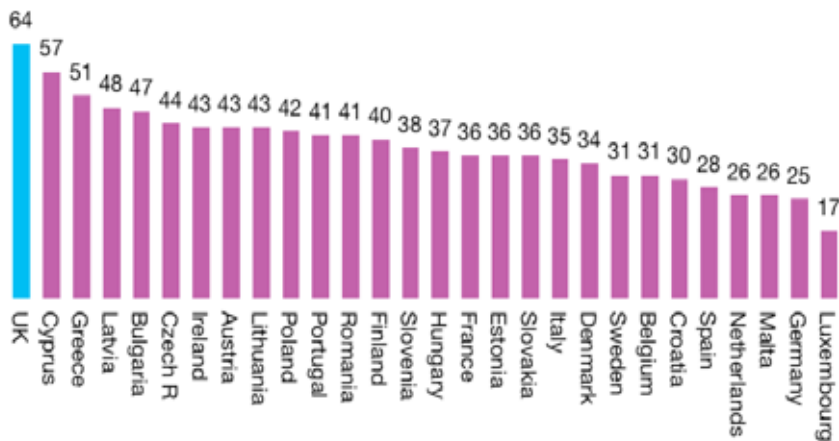
In addition, Social Identity Theory proposes that the development of national identity in relation to Europe is the most significant contributing factor to support or oppose the EU. As Curley (2009) argues, strongly identifying in-group members are less likely to include an outsider in order to protect their group identity. Thus, the compatibility between European and national identities depends on the way people think about their identities and whether they are afraid that European integration could entail losing their national identities. This incompatibility between British and European identities partly explains the logic behind the Brexit.

National identities are important in shaping attitudes toward the European Union. One of the most important reasons for which Britain has been hesitant to deepen its integration into the EU is the

separation of the British identity and the European identity. As argued by Curtice (2017, p. 21), ‘during 40 years of membership, few in Britain have taken the European project to heart, as indicated by their low level of willingness to acknowledge a European identity’.

According to the Eurobarometer survey data, the idea of feeling European seems to have little resonance on average across the UK, showing that Britain had the lowest levels of identification with Europe among other EU countries. Consequently, the UK stands out from other European nations as being particularly unlikely to embrace any sense of European identity (Ormston, 2015) (Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** % saying they would see themselves as ‘NATIONALITY only’ by country, 2015



Source: Eurobarometer, 2015 (in Ormston, 2015, p. 7)

Therefore, according to data, British identity has not been Europeanised as much as others yet, and the Brexit vote

emphasised that sometimes identity matters more than socioeconomic concerns the individual might hold. Identity has therefore been a more important motivation in encouraging the British people to vote for Brexit (Cain, 2010), compared to other socioeconomic elements. Moreover, Risse (2010, p. 82) found that in countries with strong and stable national identities which, are not constructed to include Europe, like in Britain, elites who may identify themselves with Europe or support European integration cannot use identity narratives as a way to support European integration.

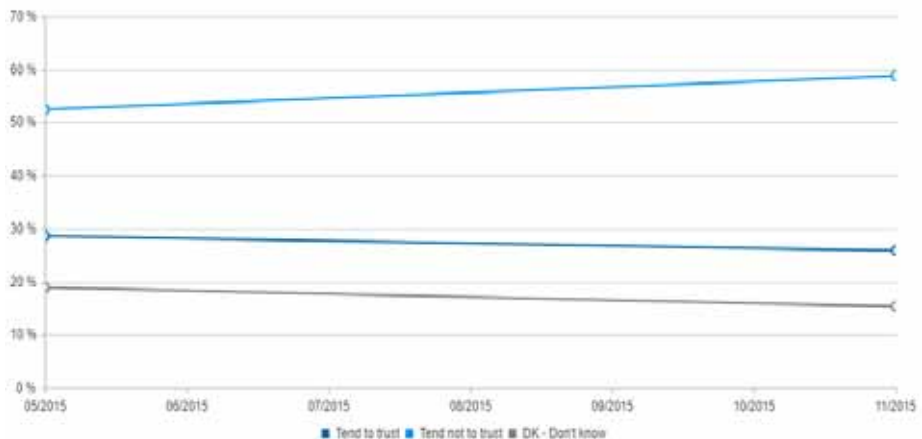
The reason for the negative relationship between British identification and European identification may be explained according to self-categorisation theory, which claims that there is a 'functional antagonism' between different levels of categorisation (Reid, 1987). From that perspective, different categorisations are perceived as more salient than others in different contexts, and people tend to use the most salient level of categorisation. The significant negative relationship between British identification and European identification is in line with this argument (Macdougall, Feddes, & Doosje, 2020). In other words, those British people who tend to use British identification as their most salient level of categorisation (exclusive national identity) are less likely to identify themselves as European.

It is also worth mentioning that according to certain studies (Hobolt, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2005), weaker European identity leads to Euroscepticism. As a result, why should a weaker sense of European identity lead individuals to adopt Eurosceptic attitudes? There seem to be at least two key reasons. First, individuals with a weaker sense of European identity will be less likely to perceive supra-national EU institutions as legitimate, and hence they will be more inclined to oppose the transfer of powers from their own

national parliament to a supra-national institution. Second, that same individuals will be less likely to feel solidarity towards other Europeans, such as people who have immigrated from the EU, as well as those living in other EU member states (Carl, Dennison, & Evans, 2019). As a result, Eurosceptics are obsessed with protecting Britain’s national sovereignty against Brussels-based policy-making, and either want its powers reduced or prefer to leave the EU.

The UK has been one of the most Eurosceptic countries in the EU since it joined the Union in 1973 (Hobolt, 2016), which can be explained by Britons’ weak sense of European identity. At least half of the Britons have been ‘Eurosceptic’ for the last 20 years (Phillips, Curtice, Phillips, & Perry, 2018). According to the Eurobarometer Poll in 2015, a year before the referendum vote, only 34% of Britons said that they trusted the European Parliament (Figure 4).

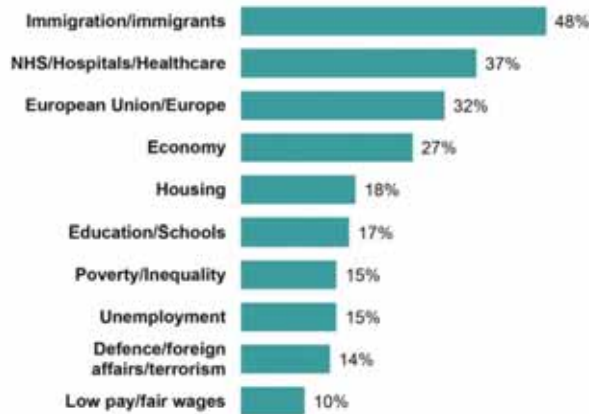
**Figure 4:** level of trust in the European Union, 2015



Source: Eurobarometer, 2015

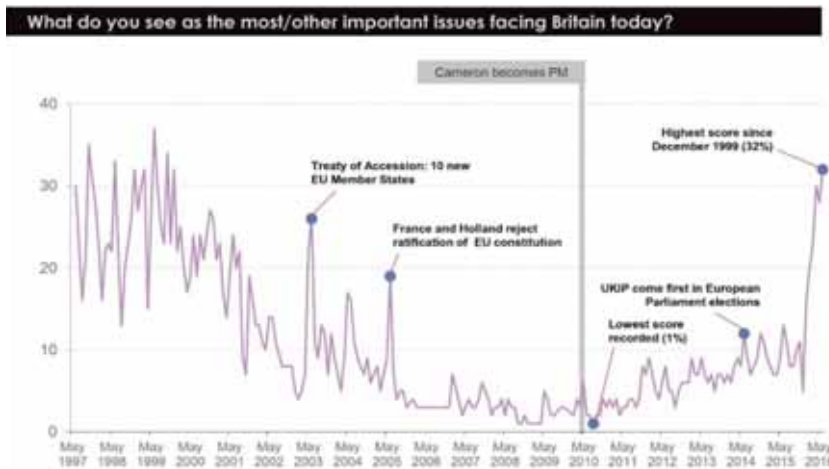
Furthermore, Immediately prior to the referendum, Britons were asked to name the most important issues facing the country, and Ipsos MORI data (2016) showed that Europe was the third most highly ranked problem, mentioned by 32% of respondents (Figure 5 & 6).

**Figure 5:** the most important issues facing Britain, 2016



Ipsos MORI Issues Index, June 2016, page 2

**Figure 6:** Issues facing Britain: Europe, 1997-2016



Source: Ipsos MORI Issues Index, June 2016, page 7



In conclusion, measuring people's identification as European predicts that the less strongly people identify themselves with the EU, the more likely they are to vote to leave it. As a result, Britain's weak sense of European identity was a key contributor to the Brexit vote (Carl et al., 2019). On the other hand, holding both European and national identity results in much higher support for the EU, than those who exclusively hold national identity, which usually opposes all forms of European integration (Risse, 2010). Therefore, those who identified themselves more strongly as 'British,' acted more Eurosceptic than those who identified themselves more strongly as 'European', and consequently, they were more prone to vote for Brexit.

### **3. 3. Social Comparison**

Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggest that in-groups seek to positively distinguish themselves from out-group by accentuating specific attributes or achievements that favour the in-group over other out-groups. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986a), positive social identity is based on favourable comparisons that are made between the in-group and out-groups. Therefore, one can evaluate its own group with respect to specific other groups through social comparisons in terms of value-laden attributes and characteristics. This means that people are constantly evaluating their own group by comparing it to other groups in terms of wealth, status and social position. In fact, they compare their group favourably against other ones to maintain their self-esteem.

Self-esteem was a critical factor in the 2016 Brexit Referendum. In fact, the Brexit vote was about national self-esteem, which had a spill over into the public vote during the referendum by making decisions to enhance the British self-esteem. As Beaumont (2019) argues, Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals are often

willing to forgo economic gains to improve their social group's status by positive comparisons with out-groups to generate pride and self-esteem. Thus, in the following section, the study will analyse some of the outcomes of these social comparisons and their effects on the Brexit vote.

### 3. 3. 1. British Nationalism

Nationalism is a type of positive in-group evaluation, in which in-group members, namely citizens, tend to believe that their country is superior to others and hence should be dominant. Nationalists tend to focus primarily on perceptions of national superiority and idealisation of the nation and its dominance or history. Like other forms of nationalism, British nationalism is necessarily based on a sense of difference and separation from an 'Other', which is often other rival neighbouring nations. In most of the British history, this 'Other' could only have been European. The long record of Britain's opposition to the continental tyrannies such as Philip II, Louis XIV and Napoleon also reinforced this sense of differentiation. Thus, for past generations, this image of British liberties being defended against the threat from the Continent has been deeply rooted at all levels of the British society (Davis, 2017).

Britain's greatness was a common theme during the Brexit debate. Greatness is linked to the UK's unique national past and associated with the UK's global standing as a nation-state. For instance, Aaron Banks, head of the Leave.EU campaign stated, 'we're the sixth largest economy in the world, we're a great country, why do we believe we should be dictated to from a foreign place?' (Colville, 2015). Moreover, Right-wing tabloids were constantly emphasising that Britain is the greatest country in the world and can regain its position as a great power. According to Hooghe and Marks (2005), greater nationalism is related to greater Euroscepticism. Therefore, the Leave campaign used nationalistic

rhetoric to evoke more positive in-group favouritism and, as a result, more out-group derogation. Thus, those with more nationalistic views were more likely to vote in favour of leaving the EU.

### **3. 3. 2. British Exceptionalism**

British exceptionalism is the idea that Britain is inherently different from and superior to other nations. As mentioned before, not only does the country stand apart geographically from the continent, but it also distinguishes itself historically. Accordingly, the British people pride themselves on their country's exceptional history of continuous freedom, self-government, and the rule of law (Campanella, 2019). Therefore, Britain's isolation has somehow led to British exceptionalism.

The geographical position of the UK has constantly augmented this sense of exceptionalism. For instance, one of the most complete iterations of British exceptionalism was articulated by Winston Churchill after the Second World War. According to Churchill's 1948 'three circles' theory, Britain was operating at the centre of three circles of power and influence: Europe, the United States, and the Commonwealth, with Britain as the crucial link between them (Taylor, 2018). Later, Tony Blair and some of his predecessors also employed the notion 'bridge-builder' in connecting different regions of the world, suggesting a unique role for the UK in the world.

When Charles de Gaulle vetoed Britain's membership of the European Economic Community twice, his action was justified by repeated references to Britain's insular position and maritime status. In fact, he linked his veto on British membership to British exceptionalism. According to Charles de Gaulle (1963), Britain was simply not European enough:

England in effect is insular; she is maritime, she is linked through her exchanges, her markets, her supply lines to the most diverse and often the most distant countries; she pursues essentially industrial and commercial activities, and only slight agricultural ones. She has in all her doings very marked and very original habits and traditions. In short, the nature, the structure, the very situation that are England's differ profoundly from those of the continentals.

Furthermore, when the United Kingdom's accession to the then EEC took effect in 1973, large parts of the British media adopted an initial Europhile view that was tinged with haughty superiority. For instance, the Daily Mail celebrated Britain's accession with the headline, 'Now we can lead Europe!'. Moreover, the Sun told readers that membership offered 'an unrepeatable opportunity for a nation that lost an empire to gain a Continent'. Furthermore, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1990, in Risse, 2019, p. 205) described the British involvement in the EU as having limits: 'We shall never accept the approach of those who want to see the [EU] as a means of removing our ability to govern ourselves as an independent nation. The British Parliament had endured for 700 years and had been a beacon of hope to the peoples of Europe in their darkest days'. She asserted British exceptionalism with regard to the EU in the Bruges speech, believing that Britain deserves preferential treatment and more-than-equal status.

Even now, this superior mentality continues with notable Brexiters repeatedly stating that 'they need us more than we need them'. These are some of the origins of the British sense of superiority over the continental Europeans and consequently a central aspect of the country's Euroscepticism. As Snower (2016) argues, the sense of exceptionalism has led the British people to vote for Britain to leave the EU. Therefore, this vision of Britain's

role in the world and British exceptionalism may have provided the key to Brexit.

### **3. 3. 3. Collective Narcissism**

In social psychology, collective narcissism is the tendency to exaggerate the positive image and importance of a group to which individuals belong (Federico & Golec de Zavala, 2018). In fact, collective narcissism is a belief that the in-group is exceptional and entitled to privileged treatment, but it is not sufficiently recognised and appreciated by others (Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, & Lantos, 2019).

Collective narcissists believe that their group (their nation) is unique, superior and consequently deserves special treatment from other groups. Moreover, they believe that others do not appreciate their in-group enough. This fosters an excessive need to defend the in-group image. Moreover, they reject groups that somehow threaten their group's grandiose image. Consequently, collective narcissists may be mobilised by political rhetoric emphasising threatened national uniqueness. Therefore, collective narcissism might predict political behaviours such as support for anti-immigrant policies, voting for political parties that support such politics or, in the case of the EU referendum, choosing to leave the EU.

### **3. 3. 4. Retrotopian Appeal**

Temporal Comparison Theory (Albert, 1977) is a branch of the Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that not only do individuals compare themselves to their peers, but they also compare themselves to their former self's status. Hence, individuals seek to show self-improvement over time to maintain their self-

esteem, which is important to investigate when discussing Brexit and the value that the British people place on retaining their status as a global superpower.

In fact, Brexit embodies a retrotopian appeal. A retrotopian vision is a nostalgic vision for the future based on a lost but undead past (Beaumont, 2019). As a former world power, the UK has never been entirely happy with its new role as an EU member state, even an important one. Certain scholars argue that the crisis over Britain's role in Europe is rooted in a deep sense of unease about how Britain's role in the world is declining. As Lowe (2017) argues, Britain has a hard time accepting its new position in the world, which has been referred to as a 'delusion of grandeur'.

Thus, the Brexit campaign used slogans such as 'Take back control' and 'Make Britain great again' to suggest that the nation's unique position has somehow been undermined and thus needs to be restored. In fact, the concept of 'making Britain great again' captures a longing for a time when Britain ruled the waves and was defined by its racial and cultural superiority. As a result, many people thought that by voting to Leave, they could actually revive the British past, and they regarded Brexit as an opportunity for a national renewal.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper examined the construction of the British national identity according to Social Identity Theory processes, such as social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison. National identity is an important element in explaining public attitudes towards the European Union. This study investigated the process of identity formation and its significance in shaping public attitude toward the European Union. By analysing the underlying

process of identity formation in the UK, this study also illustrated the way in which this unique identity formation affected people's decision-making in the 2016 Referendum.

Regarding the process of social categorisation, the paper explored the formation of the British national identity according to the British unique history and geography with respect to its European neighbours. It also examined how the notion of 'otherness' and the image of superiority is linked to the creation of the British identity. Brexit is a unique event, and according to Hobolt (2016), the sentiment that led to this outcome is a distinctively British phenomenon. The long history of Britain, as well as the legacy of the British Empire, both played a significant role in shaping the British national identity. British people are exceptionally proud of their history; they are reluctant to forget their long history of imperialism, the Empire on which the Sun never set, and restrict themselves by EU regulations. This may be due to Britain's self-image as a great power. Therefore, leave voters have found Brexit as an opportunity for national renewal.

Through an investigation of the social identification process, the paper measured the level of the British people's inclination toward identifying themselves as British and/or European. Using data from Eurobarometer, we explored the degree of British and European identification and analysed the relationship between this identity and people's views on the European Union, which suggested that Britain's weak sense of European identity was a key contributor to the Brexit vote.

Concerning the social comparison process, the paper explored the outcomes of various social comparisons, such as British nationalism, British exceptionalism, collective narcissism, and retrotopian appeal, and explained the ways in which these

comparisons were connected to Euroscepticism and consequently the Brexit vote among the British people.

The distinction between Self and Other is an essential part of identity formation. Thus, the self/other nexus affected the process of national identity formation in the UK through different factors such as geography and history. Britain's self-image of itself has been shaped according to its unique history and geography. Therefore, the unique formation of the British national identity can be considered as one of the most important origins of Britain's distanced attitude towards the rest of the Continent.

This study indicated that the British identity has not been Europeanised as much as other European countries yet, and that Britain had the lowest levels of identification with Europe among other EU countries. Accordingly, people with exclusive British identity are less likely to identify themselves as European. In turn, a weaker European identity leads to Euroscepticism. Consequently, Britain's weak sense of European identity can be considered as a key contributor to the 2016 Brexit vote.

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