

“IT'S NOT ALL WORK BEING AN ACTIVIST AFTER ALL”: A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF IN-GROUP IDENTITIES ON RADICAL RIGHT TWITTER

Dr Keighley Perkins



CONTENT WARNING

BACKGROUND

THE CONTEXT: WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The far-right riots across the UK in the summer of 2024 brought **underlying social tensions** to the surface.

Recent government attention on what can be classified as **terrorism / extremism** demonstrates a need to revisit how we understand these terms.

Social media has led our lives to become **increasingly polarised** (Martin, 2025).



Twitter brain drain: Elon Musk's takeover caused academic exodus, study shows

'Twitter has been an important platform for academic communication and networking, especially among social scientists,' researchers say

Anthony Cuthbertson • Tuesday 22 October 2024 16:05 BST • 1 Comments

TIMELINE

HOW ELON MUSK AND X BECAME THE BIGGEST PURVEYORS OF ONLINE MISINFORMATION

The tech billionaire always had a problem with telling the truth — now he has an entire social network built on lies

By MILES KLEE
AUGUST 9, 2024



THE CONTEXT: WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

- **Mainstream social media** is the **dominant site** through which extremist groups **attract and interact** with followers (Kenyon, Binder and Baker-Beall, 2021).
- Between 2015-17, **83%** of extremist offenders were subject to **some degree of online radicalisation** compared to **17%** who were radicalised **offline** (Kenyon, Binder and Baker-Beall, 2021).
- Changes to social media (i.e., Twitter Blue) has provided extremist groups with **an air of legitimacy** (Hope Not Hate, 2023).

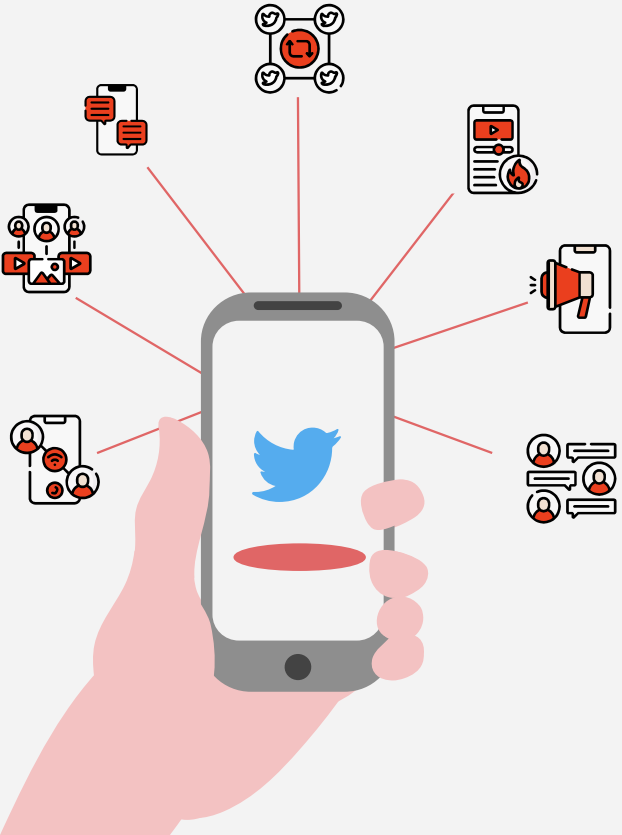
THE CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING THE HOW

- Offers **increased visibility**, a **broader geographical reach**, and **greater functionality** than face-to-face equivalents (Galloway and Scrivens, 2018; Maras, 2017; Weimann and Masri, 2020).

- Used to "**create a brand image**, **market themselves**, **recruit followers**, raise capital, identify partners and suppliers, **provide training materials**, and even **manage operations**" (Lachow and Richardson, 2007: 100, emphasis added).



THE CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING THE HOW



Communicates the **skills, behaviours and ideologies espoused by the group** in real-time (Koehler, 2014).

Enables members to **commodify and display their in-group identity status** through the use of **symbols** and **iconography** (Koehler, 2014).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. WHAT IDENTITIES ARE DISCURSIVELY CONSTRUCTED BY THE RADICAL RIGHT FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR FOLLOWERS ON TWITTER?

2. HOW ARE THESE IDENTITIES LINGUISTICALLY AND VISUALLY CONSTRUCTED?

3. HOW CAN WE USE LINGUISTIC TOOLKITS TO ASSIST IN LAW ENFORCEMENT EFFORTS?

THE CONTEXT: IDENTITY

The **social positioning** of **self** and **other** (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 598).

Acquires "**social meaning** in relation to **other available identity positions** and **other social actors**" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 598, emphasis added).

"[A] **discursive construct** that **emerges in interaction**" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 586, emphasis added).

"[A] **social**, **cultural**, and – most fundamentally – **interactional phenomenon**" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 608).



THE CONTEXT: EXTREMIST IDENTITIES

In-Group	VS	Out-Group
• Shares the **beliefs** and **values** of the group (Berger, 2018).		• Have a **different set of beliefs and values** than the in-group (Berger, 2018).
• Belongs to an **approved ethnicity** and/or **nationality** (Berger, 2018).		• Belong to a **different ethnicity and/or nationality** than the in-group (Berger, 2018).

- The boundaries between the two groups are "often **vague**, **highly subjective** and **changeable over time**" (Berger, 2018: 53, emphasis added).
- Highlights the incompatibility of the two groups (Berger, 2021; Lorenzo-Dus and Macdonald, 2018).

THE CONTEXT: WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The identities constructed by extremist groups:

- Take the form of "**a participatory identity**" (Winter, 2017: 16) that make members feel part of **a legitimate social movement** (Koehler, 2014).

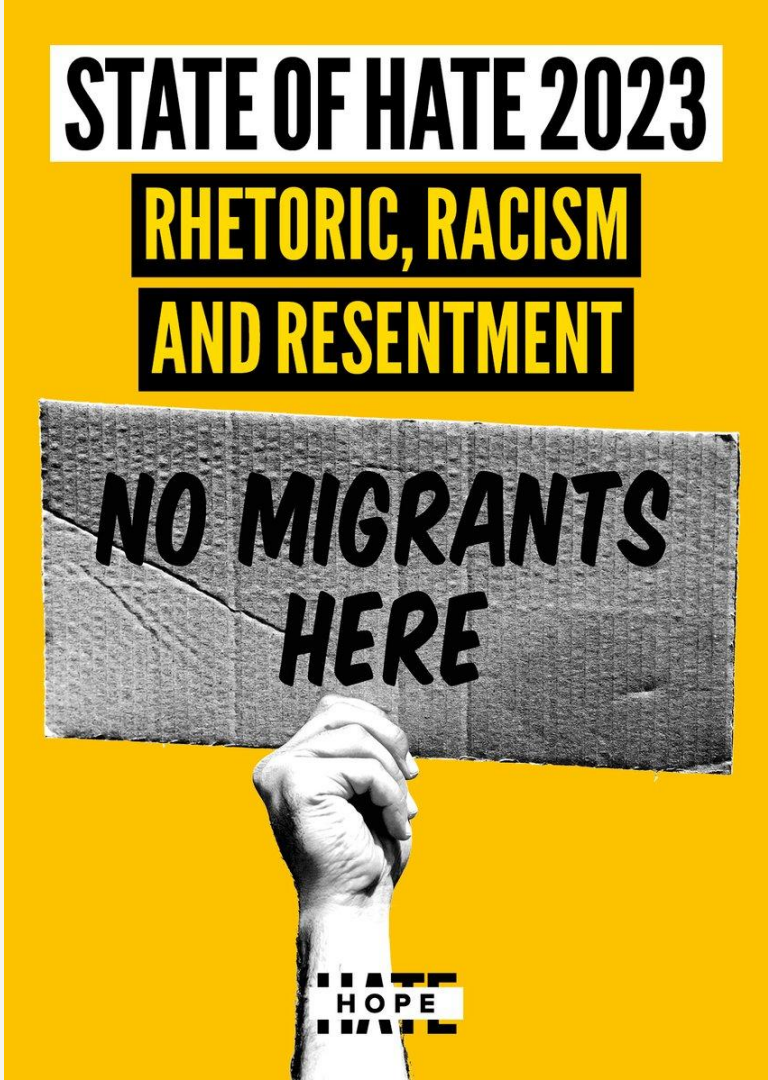
- **Empower** group members and function "as a **catalyst** for **further involvement** or **action** in **support of the movement**" (Bowman-Grieve, 2009: 996).

- Develop **a shared sense of identity** between members to the extent that a member's **personal and group identity** are **viewed as one and the same** (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Webber and Kruglanski, 2017: 42).

- Appeal to those lacking **a strong sense of self** and **social belonging** (Webber and Kruglanski, 2017; Barlett and Miller, 2012).

THE CONTEXT: WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

- Extremist sympathisers typically **lack a strong sense of self and social belonging** (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Koehler, 2014; Webber and Kruglanski, 2017).
- Extremist groups **capitalise on social frustrations** to argue there is "a **growing perceived disadvantage of their cultural identity** (whiteness, male, straight, etc.)" (Hope Not Hate, 2023: 11).
- **Personal and group identities** can be **merged into one**, resulting in members feeling **legitimised to engage in violence** to protect this identity (Bowman-Grieve, 2009).



APPROACH

THE DATA



THE EDL

Far-right
8-month period
3,229 tweets
50,670 words
681 images

SIEGE CULTURE

Extreme right
8-month period
407 tweets
4,812 words
6 images

GENERATION IDENTITY

Unclassified
10-month period
1,332 tweets
25,716 words
87 images

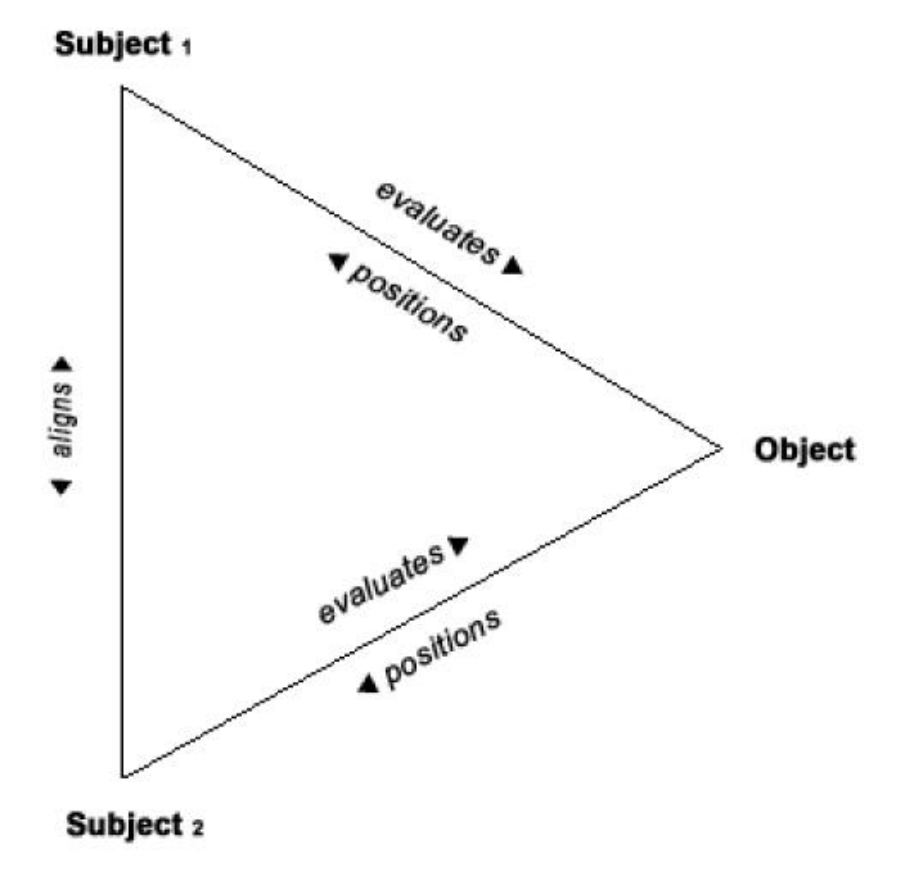
Stance analysis investigates “how speakers and writers are necessarily engaged in **positioning themselves vis-à-vis their words and texts** (which are embedded in histories of linguistic and textual production), **their interlocutors and audiences** (both actual and virtual/project/imagined), and **with respect to a context that they simultaneously respond to and construct linguistically**”.

STANCE ANALYSIS

Jaffe (2009:4, emphasis added)

STANCE ANALYSIS

Du Bois (2007: 163)

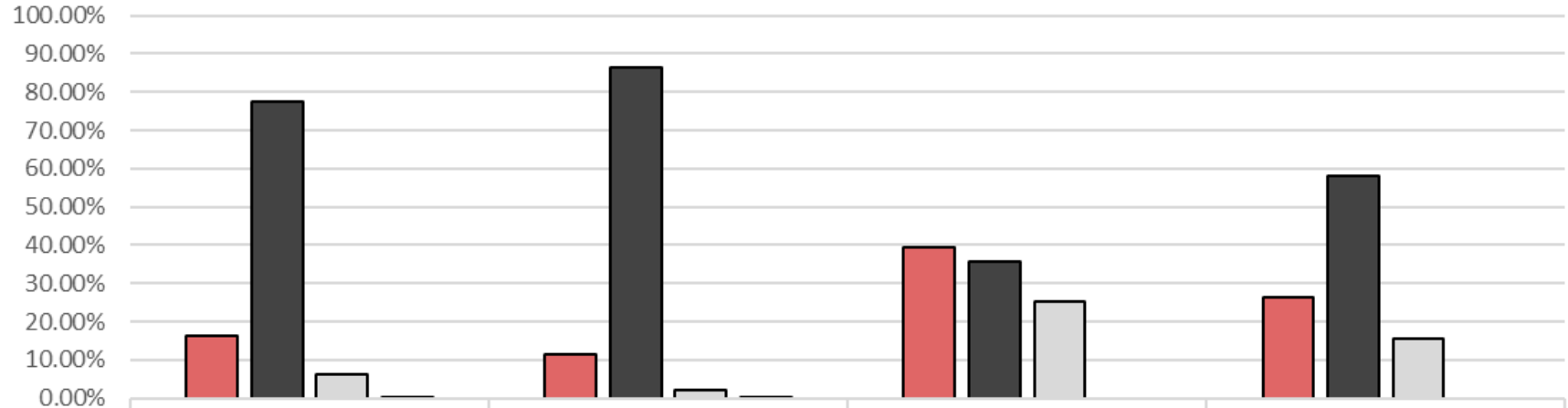


DATA ANALYSIS: STANCE ANALYSIS

TOPICS

Topic	Category
Politics: Tweets that refer to people, activities and events associated with the governance of a particular country and/or area.	**Political Governance:** Tweets that refer to the political mechanics of running a country, such as the writing of policies, voting and elections.
	Political Ideology: Tweets that discuss specific political ideologies, theories and/or individuals affiliated with them.
	Political Movements: Tweets that refer to political parties and/or their representatives either as individuals or as figureheads for political policies or beliefs.
	Political Praxis: Tweets that refer to a political campaign or protest that has taken form either in a virtual or real-world capacity.
Social Issues: Tweets that refer to a topic that impacts on society at large and/or influences how individual's personal lives are perceived within a given society.	**Business and the Economy:** Tweets that refer to the management or administration of good, services, and money in a specific geographical region.
	Crime and the Legal System: Tweets that refer to contemporaneous/historical criminal incident/s or the legal system in general (i.e., references to the police or the court system).
	Education: Tweets that refer to any level of the formal education system within the geographical region being discussed, including the subjects themselves or the manner in which these subjects are taught.
	Free Speech: Tweets that refer to the notion, promotion and/or suppression of free speech whether in virtual or real-world contexts.
	Gender and Sexuality: Tweets that refer to societal understandings and perceptions of gender, sexuality and family roles.
	Homelessness: Tweets that refer to the treatment and situation/s of those without fixed, regular or adequate housing.
	Immigration: Tweets that refer to the movement of people from one country to another with the purpose of settling there as permanent residents.
	Media: Tweets that refer to events, figures, issues and/or news relating to any form of mass media communication, such as television, social media, and books.
	Multiculturalism: Tweets that refer to the presence, or policies in support, of multiple distinctive cultural or ethnic identities within a particular geographical region.
	Patriotism: Tweets that refer to a love for or devotion to the country of the subject of the tweet.
	Race and Racism: Tweets that refer to race discrimination and/or race relations in a particular geographical region.
	Religion: Tweets that refer to or discuss a particular religious denomination, including references to its followers, teachings and/or associated symbols.
	Social Services: Tweets that refer to the government services provided for the benefit of the community in a specific geographical region.
	Sports: Tweets that refer to any athletic and/or other sporting activities, e.g., football, rugby, and cricket.
	The Military: Tweets that refer to the armed forces of a specific geographical region, e.g., the army, the navy, and the air force.
Themselves: Tweets that refer to the radical right group sharing the tweet in some capacity, either as an organisation or via its members.	
Others: Tweets that refer to one or more of the radical right organisations being studied in some capacity, either as an organisation or via its members.	

TOPICS



	All (%)	English Defence League (%)	Siege Culture (%)	Generation Identity (%)
Politics	16.35%	11.58%	39.27%	26.38%
Social Issues	77.34%	86.25%	35.60%	58.18%
Themselves	6.22%	2.05%	25.14%	15.44%
Other RRGs	0.09%	0.12%	0.00%	0.00%

IDENTITIES



THE CAMPAIGNER



THE HERO



THE VICTIM

IDENTITIES

CAMPAIGNER: TWEETS THAT POSITION THE RRG AND/OR ITS REPRESENTATIVES AS FULFILLING A POLITICAL FUNCTION.

ROLE	DEFINITION
Activist	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as actively campaigning to bring about political and/or social change, i.e., by displaying banners or stickering.
Canvasser	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as attempting to persuade those not affiliated with the organisation to support the group and/or their beliefs, i.e., through the establishment of Identitarian zones or sharing a petition.
Champion	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as enthusiastically supporting, defending or fighting for an individual, political ideology and/or cause.
Dark Horse	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as having significant support and potential to be successful despite being classed as a long-shot candidate by someone outside of the organisation.
Expert	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as informed or knowledgeable about social and political events (either domestic or international).
Group Leader	A tweet that positions one or more representatives of the RRG as functioning in a recognised leadership role within the organisation.
Group Member	A tweet that positions one or more representations of the RRG as functioning as a representation of the organisation as a whole.
Influencer	A tweet that positions the RRWG and/or its representatives as having the power to influence and/or shape another's opinions about something (e.g., a media text, a political ideology or an individual) through their social media use.
Lobbyist	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as actively trying to influence the actions of public officials or urging the passage of a bill (e.g., explicitly stating a solution to a political situation or sharing a petition).
Protester	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representative as actively participating in an organised, public protest, i.e., a march or demonstration.

IDENTITIES

HERO: TWEETS THAT POSITION THE RRG AND/OR ITS REPRESENTATIVES AS FULFILLING A HEROIC AND/OR POSITIVE ACT.

ROLE	DEFINITION
Fighter	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as using an ability, skill and/or characteristic to overcome a challenge (whether physical, mental, or emotional), e.g., climbing a mountain or arguing with political opponents.
Role Model	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as behaving in an exemplary manner in relation to the goals or values of the group (e.g., patrolling the border between two countries to deter migrants).
Patriot	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as admiring, advocating for and/or defending their country and/or its interests.
Philanthropist	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as demonstrating altruistic concern for others in form the form of donating goods and/or resources to those in need.
Whistle-blower	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as disclosing corruption or wrongdoing by an individual, group and/or organisation.

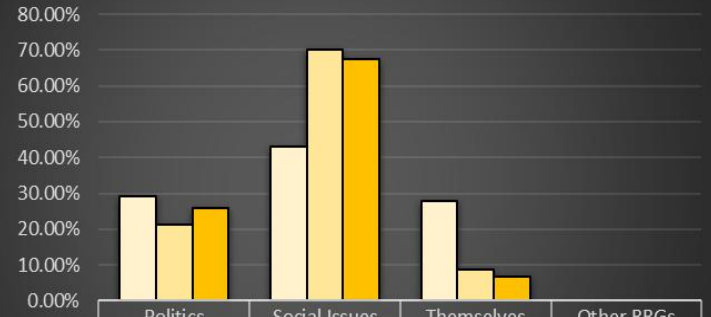
IDENTITIES

VICTIM: TWEETS THAT POSITION THE RWG SENDING THE TWEET AND/OR ITS MEMBERS AS FULFILLING THE ROLE OF A VICTIM.

ROLE	DEFINITION
Cassandra	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as having correctly predicted disastrous consequences to social and/or political decisions but having been ignored by those in positions of authority.
Character Assassination	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as being depicted in a negative light by an individual and/or collective outside of the organisation, e.g., the group being misrepresented in the media.
Political Mismanagement	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as being undermined or disadvantaged through political means, e.g., via a policy decision that appears to remove one or more of their rights.
Political Intimidation	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as being attacked and/or confronted by a political opponent and/or group.
Victorious Underdog	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as correct about a political issue despite being mocked or doubted by others for their views.

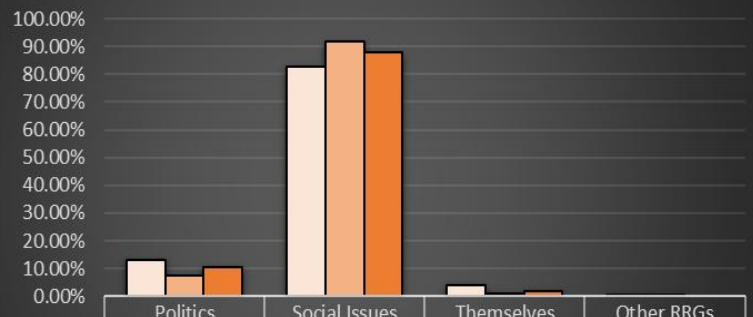
IDENTITIES BY TOPIC

Generation Identity



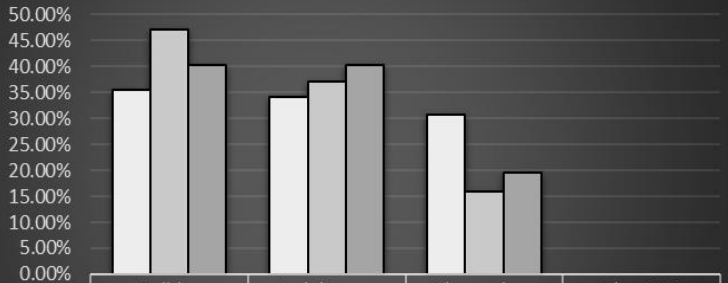
	Politics	Social Issues	Themselves	Other RRGs
Campaigner (%)	29.16%	43.14%	27.71%	0.00%
Hero (%)	21.27%	70.14%	8.60%	0.00%
Victim (%)	25.77%	67.50%	6.73%	0.00%

EDL



	Politics	Social Issues	Themselves	Other RRGs
Campaigner (%)	13.22%	82.69%	3.91%	0.19%
Hero (%)	7.53%	91.63%	0.80%	0.03%
Victim (%)	10.46%	87.81%	1.72%	0.00%

Siege Culture



	Politics	Social Issues	Themselves	Other RRGs
Campaigner (%)	35.41%	34.01%	30.58%	0.00%
Hero (%)	47.12%	37.02%	15.87%	0.00%
Victim (%)	40.20%	40.20%	19.61%	0.00%

EXTREMIST IN-GROUP IDENTITY

<table>
<tr><th>HERO</th><th>VICTIM</th></tr>
<tr><td>Happy (Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus, 2019; Watkin and Looney, 2019).</td><td>Victims of Western violence (Watkin and Looney, 2019).</td></tr>
<tr><td>Respected (Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus, 2019).</td><td rowspan="2">Suffering at the hands of the out-group (Lorenzo-Dus and Nouri, 2020).</td></tr>
<tr><td>Achieving fulfilment through religion (Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus, 2019) or the military (Watkin and Looney, 2019).</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Part of a loving, homogenous family (Watkin and Looney, 2019; Lorenzo-Dus and Nouri, 2020).</td></tr>
</table>

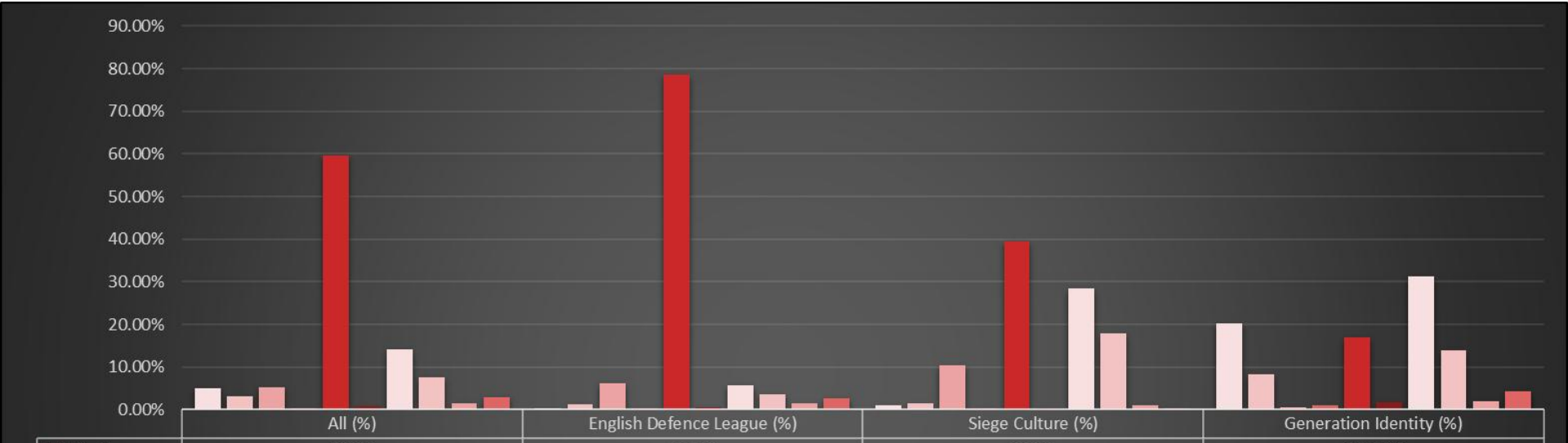
DATA ANALYSIS:
THE CAMPAIGNER IDENTITY

ROLES

Campaigner: Tweets that position the RRG and/or its representatives as fulfilling a political function.

Role	Definition
Activist	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as actively campaigning to bring about political and/or social change, i.e., by displaying banners or stickering.
Canvasser	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as attempting to persuade those not affiliated with the organisation to support the group and/or their beliefs, i.e., through the establishment of Identitarian zones or sharing a petition.
Champion	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as enthusiastically supporting, defending or fighting for an individual, political ideology and/or cause.
Dark Horse	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as having significant support and potential to be successful despite being classed as a long-shot candidate by someone outside of the organisation.
Expert	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as informed or knowledgeable about social and political events (either domestic or international).
Group Leader	A tweet that positions one or more representatives of the RRG as functioning in a recognised leadership role within the organisation.
Group Member	A tweet that positions one or more representations of the RRG as functioning as a representation of the organisation as a whole.
Influencer	A tweet that positions the RRWG and/or its representatives as having the power to influence and/or shape another's opinions about something (e.g., a media text, a political ideology or an individual) through their social media use.
Lobbyist	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representatives as actively trying to influence the actions of public officials or urging the passage of a bill (e.g., explicitly stating a solution to a political situation or sharing a petition).
Protester	A tweet that positions the RRG and/or its representative as actively participating in an organised, public protest, i.e., a march or demonstration.

THE CAMPAIGNER



	All (%)	English Defence League (%)	Siege Culture (%)	Generation Identity (%)
Activist	5.01%	0.12%	0.92%	20.14%
Canvasser	3.04%	1.33%	1.47%	8.37%
Champion	5.24%	6.15%	10.50%	0.47%
Dark Horse	0.28%	0.06%	0.18%	0.95%
Expert	59.70%	78.50%	39.41%	16.98%
Group Leader	0.78%	0.49%	0.18%	1.82%
Group Member	14.10%	5.61%	28.36%	31.20%
Influencer	7.48%	3.52%	17.86%	13.82%
Lobbyist	1.54%	1.50%	0.92%	1.90%
Protester	2.85%	2.72%	0.18%	4.34%

LEGITIMATION THEORY

- "the process by which **the exertion of power by one person, group or political body over another** is made to be – and **maintained as being – acceptable** to those over whom power is wielded" (Mackay, 2015: 325).

- Legitimation is **a social phenomenon** as it relies on **socially constructed norms, values and beliefs** (Ferreira and Chimenti, 2020).

- What is deemed as legitimate **varies between social groups** based on what they deem to be **natural, rational or common-sense** (Mackay, 2015).

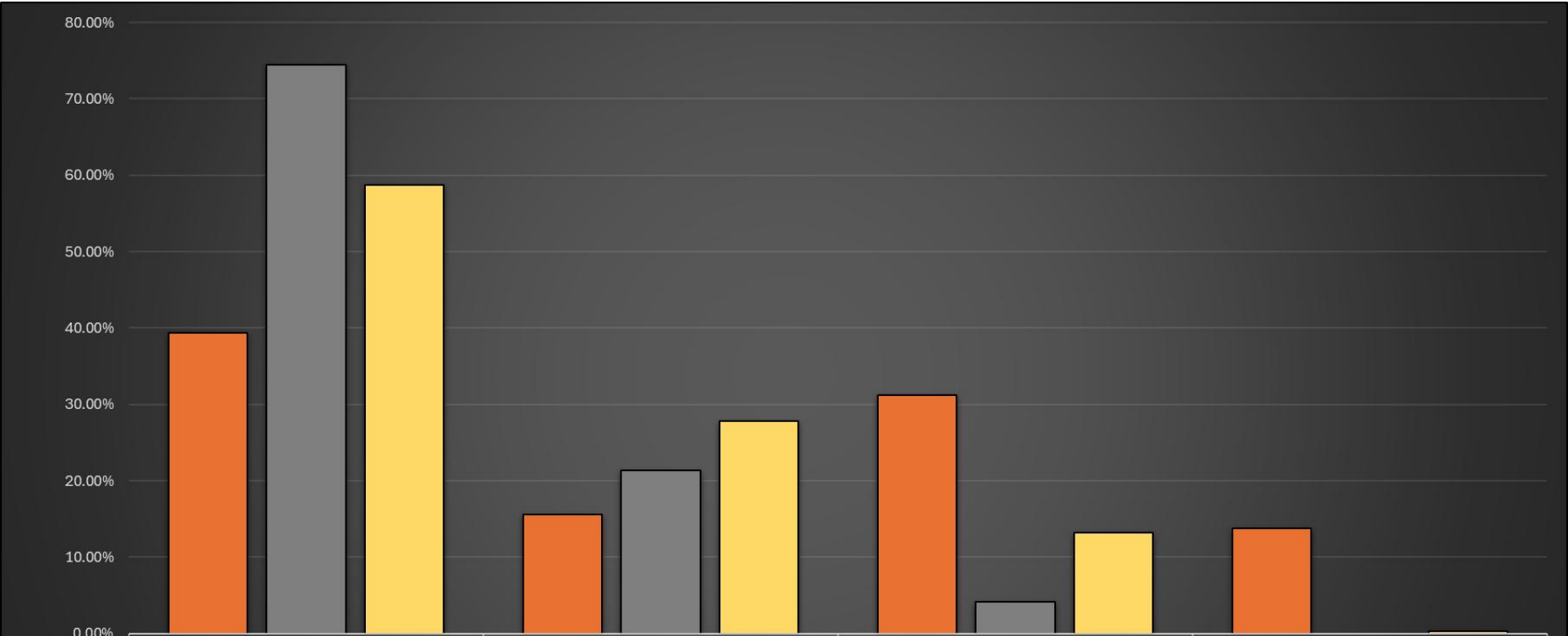


LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES

Authorization: Legitimation achieved via the authority of an individual, custom or law.	**Authority**: Legitimation achieved via references to either a social actor's role and/or status, or the rules, laws and regulations of a particular geographical region.
	Commendation: Legitimation achieved via references to a social actor's expertise and/or status within the RRG being discussed.
	Custom: Legitimation achieved via the implicit social norms and expectations within a particular geographical region and/or the RRG being discussed.
Moral Evaluation: Legitimation achieved through reference to codes of behaviour deemed right or wrong by a particular society and/or the RRG being discussed.	**Evaluation**: Legitimation achieved via positive or negative linguistic judgements or assessments made about a particular person or object.
	Abstraction: Legitimation achieved by equating an activity, behaviour and/or attribute with a positive/negative moral value.
	Comparison: Legitimation achieved via comparisons with an activity, behaviour and/or attribute with a positive/negative moral value.
Rationalization: Legitimation achieved by relating an attitude, behaviour and/or process to logical reasoning.	**Instrumental Rationalization**: Legitimation achieved by relating the goal, process and/or effect of an attitude, behaviour and/or process to logical reasoning.
	Theoretical Rationalization: Legitimation achieved via drawing upon knowledge, norms and/or evidence to relate an attitude, behaviour and/or process to a truth claim.
Mythopoesis: Legitimation achieved by relating an attitude, behaviour and/or process to a narrative.	**Moral Tale**: Legitimation achieved via a narrative whereby the protagonist is rewarded for an attitude, behaviour and/or process typically engaged in or supported by the RRG sharing the tweet and/or being discussed.
	Cautionary Tale: Legitimation achieved via a narrative whereby the protagonist is punished for an attitude, behaviour and/or process typically discouraged by the RRG sharing the tweet and/or being discussed.

Van Leeuwen (2007)

LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES



	Authority Legitimation	Moral Legitimation	Rationalization Legitimation	Mythopoesis
EDL (%)	39.42%	15.62%	31.16%	13.80%
SC (%)	74.50%	21.33%	4.17%	0.00%
GI UKRI (%)	58.68%	27.82%	13.22%	0.28%

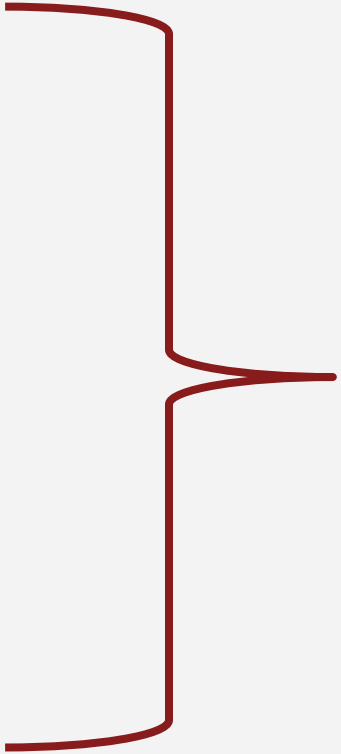
CONCLUSIONS & APPLICATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

THE EDL

SIEGE CULTURE

GENERATION IDENTITY



All three groups **emphasise their political identity** over their heroic or victimised identity.

All three groups **legitimise their political identity** through **some form of expertise**.

APPLICATIONS

Captured **a holistic view** of the three groups.

Saw the three groups **as they saw themselves** and **the world around them**.

Enables law enforcement to **allocate resources** and **provide a targeted response**.

Identified what **attributes**, **behaviours** and **ideologies** were **represented as "commonsense"** to the followers of each group.





CREDITS: This presentation template was created by **Slidesgo**, including icons by **Flaticon**, and infographics & images by **Freepik**