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The Brexit effect? Identity, threat and preferences for Irish (re)unification in the island of Ireland

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**UNIVERSITY OF
LIMERICK**
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**The Brexit Effect? Identity, Threat and Preferences for Irish (Re)unification in the
Island of Ireland**

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Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology

University of Limerick

Supervised by

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Abstract

The United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union in 2016, known as 'Brexit', marked a period of political uncertainty, particularly for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This thesis addresses the Brexit context on the island of Ireland using a social identity approach. Through three empirical chapters, it explores how identity and threat shape the post-Brexit political landscape, with a specific focus on the rising calls for the (re)unification of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland into a 'United Ireland.' To achieve this, the thesis examines different groups on the island of Ireland: Nationalists and Republicans who support Irish (re)unification, specifically focussing on political leaders (Chapter 2), people who identify with this political group in Northern Ireland (Chapter 3), and Irish nationals in the Republic of Ireland (Chapter 4).

Chapter 2 explored how Republican political leaders strategically use identity to advance their political agenda of Irish (re)unification during the uncertain political context of Brexit. Through a rhetorical psychology analysis of leaders' speeches at annual conference following the Brexit referendum, the findings illustrate how leaders draw on historical narratives and place identity to appeal to divided and polarised audiences on the island of Ireland. This research provides novel insights into how leaders construct identity for political goals in a real-world divided society where identity is a point of contestation.

Chapter 3 ($N = 457$) examines perceptions of Brexit as an opportunity for a United Ireland among Nationalists and Republicans in Northern Ireland. Specifically, it investigates whether group identification and perceived Brexit threat are associated with the belief that Brexit has made their political goal of a United Ireland more achievable. The results show that strong group identification is linked to perceiving Brexit as an opportunity for Irish (re)unification, with perceived threat mediating this relationship. Nationalists with strong group identification were more likely to perceive Brexit as a threat, which in turn was

associated with seeing a United Ireland as more likely. The findings highlight the relevance of identity and threats to people's perceptions of the political reality.

Chapter 4 ($N = 267$) manipulated the economic threat presented by Brexit and assessed political preferences for a United Ireland in the Republic of Ireland. The chapter also examined the effect of Brexit's economic threat on Irish identification and perceptions of national group boundaries. Participants' preexisting beliefs about Brexit, measured by their agreement with the manipulated information about Brexit, were examined as a potential moderator. The results indicated that high-threat information about Brexit went along with more support for a United Ireland the more people agreed with the information, while disagreement with high-threat information decreased support for a United Ireland. No effects were found on Irish identification and national group boundaries. Overall, the findings suggest that in the Republic of Ireland, a United Ireland might be seen as a viable solution to Brexit when people agree with threatening information about Brexit. However, support can decrease if people disagree with the threatening information.

Together, the findings of these studies demonstrate the relevance of group identities and threats to understanding political preferences in a shifting political landscape. Applying the social identity approach to a real-world political situation in a divided context has generated new theoretical insights and practical implications.

LIST OF PAPERS

This thesis consists of the following three original empirical chapters, which are published or under review in peer-reviewed journals

Shelly, C., Muldoon, O. T., & Roth, J. (under review). Leading From the Past to the Future: Harnessing Place Identity for Political Transformation in a Divided Context. Submitted to *European Journal of Social Psychology*.

Shelly, C., Muldoon, O. T., & Roth, J. (2023). Brexit: Threat or opportunity? Nationalist identification is related to the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 29(4), 365–373.
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During the period of postgraduate study at the University of Limerick, the following papers were also published:

Shelly, C., & Muldoon, O. T. (2022). The damaging consequences of Brexit in Northern Ireland: A social psychological analysis. *The Psychologist*. <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/damages-brexit-northern-ireland>

Roth, J., Steinmann, M., Loughnane, J., Devine, P., Muldoon, O., **Shelly, C.**, ... & Campbell, C. (2024). Election results can decrease intergroup threat and through that positively affect intergroup relations. *Political Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12960>

A book chapter:

Muldoon, O. T., Lashkay, A. M., Lebedová, A., Moroney, D., **Shelly, C.**, & Skilton, L. (in press). Social Identity and Trauma in *Understanding Collective Resilience of Civilians in the Contexts of Political Violence and Repression*.

Additionally, the following film review has been published for the British Psychological Society's magazine relevant to the PhD topic:

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CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS AND INVITED TALKS

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Shelly, C., Muldoon, O. T., & Roth, J. (2022, August). Brexit: Threat or opportunity? Nationalist identification is related to the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. Presentation at the Irish Research Council small group meeting: Intergroup Relations in Face of Contemporary Challenges, Limerick, Ireland.

Shelly, C., Muldoon, O. T., & Roth, J. (2022, August). Brexit: Threat or opportunity? Nationalist identification is related to the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. Presentation at the International Society of Political Psychology Annual Conference, Athens, Greece.

Shelly, C., Muldoon, O. T., & Roth, J. (2021, April). A Social Identity Approach to Appraising Brexit in Northern Ireland. Online Presentation at the Social Psychology Days Conference 2021, University of Helsinki, Finland.

Additionally, the following summer schools were attended:

Social Identity and Groups Network (SIGN) Winter School, Queensland, Australia. (June 2022)

International Society of Political Psychology Summer Academy, Online (July 2021)

University of Essex, Longitudinal Data Analysis Training, Online (July 2021)

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DECLARATION

The substance of this thesis is the original work of the author and due reference, and acknowledgement has been made, where necessary, to the work of others. No part of the thesis has been submitted in candidature for any degree. The candidate was the primary author of the three empirical chapters.



Catriona Shelly

(Candidate)

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION

The candidate is responsible for the work presented in this thesis. Within the empirical chapters presented (Chapters Two – Four), the first-person plural ('we') is used to reflect the collaborative effort guiding the research process.

The research presented in each of the three empirical chapters was designed by the candidate under the supervision of Professor Orla Muldoon and Dr. Jenny Roth. Data collection was primarily conducted by the candidate, except for Study 2b which was part of a larger survey led by Dr. Roth. The candidate carried out the data analysis, interpretation of findings, framing of arguments and write up of the manuscripts, with support from the supervisory team.



Catriona Shelly

(Candidate)

STATEMENT OF SUPERVISOR'S CONTRIBUTION TO CO-AUTHORED STUDIES

The substantial contribution to the co-authored publications presented in this thesis were made by the candidate. This included reviewing the literature, designing the studies, conducting data collection and analysis, and writing the manuscripts for publication. The supervisors contributed to the studies by advising on study design, interpretation of findings, and writing style. The theoretical framing of the chapters developed through collaborative discussions between the candidate and supervisors.



Professor Orla Muldoon



Dr. Jenny Roth

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CHAPTER ONE

General Introduction

1.1 General Introduction and Chapter Overview

In 2016, the United Kingdom's (UK) unexpected decision to leave the European Union (EU), commonly referred to as 'Brexit', marked a moment of significant social, political, and economic change for the island of Ireland. This political event has fundamentally altered the sociopolitical landscape on the island, affecting its political stability and people's political preferences.

The island of Ireland previously endured thirty years of political instability, conflict, and violence, a period known as 'The Troubles'. While the conflict was primarily concentrated in Northern Ireland, its effects were also felt in the Republic of Ireland. This conflict largely centred on the political issue of Northern Ireland's place within the UK, making the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland a contentious site of debate. The 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement initiated more peaceful times, significantly reducing the visibility and salience of the Irish border.

However, with Northern Ireland's departure from the EU alongside the rest of the UK, while the Republic of Ireland remained an EU member state, it became necessary to redefine the Northern Ireland-Ireland border as a point of integration between the UK (a non-EU member state) and Ireland (an EU member state). This situation posed unique challenges due to the historical and political sensitivities surrounding the Irish border, complicating the region's political stability.

The political group Unionists, who support Northern Ireland's continued status within the UK and largely voted in favour of Brexit (Garry, 2016), want to avoid a border in the Irish sea, viewing it as a step towards separating Northern Ireland from the UK (Hayward et al., 2022). In contrast, the political group Nationalists, who wish for Northern Ireland to be (re)united with the rest of Ireland and largely voted against Brexit, want to avoid a hard border

on the island of Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland, the loss of joint access to the EU single market and the question of the Irish border has particularly heightened worries about the economic stability and prosperity of businesses and people across Ireland (Hayward, 2021). Thus, Brexit has triggered a period of profound political upheaval on the island of Ireland.

Despite their differences, these preferences regarding Brexit are rooted in common underlying factors. They can be understood by looking at the group identities of the people involved (e.g., Unionist, Nationalist) and the perceived threats they face (e.g., separation from the UK, separation from the Republic of Ireland). Viewing the Brexit situation through this lens, provides valuable insight into how group identities (e.g., Garry, 2016) and threats (e.g., Hayward, 2021) influence people's preferences and political stances in the Brexit context.

While previous research has demonstrated how the Brexit vote in Northern Ireland was patterned along Unionist versus Nationalist identity lines (Garry, 2016), and some preliminary evidence highlights that Brexit presents a threat to people living near the Irish border (Hayward, 2021), there is a lack of research on how people's identities and perceived threats are shaping this evolving political situation on the island of Ireland. The social and political instability catalysed by Brexit makes it imperative to understand the consequences of this pivotal political event. This thesis is concerned with the shifting political landscape in the island of Ireland post-Brexit. In particular, how Brexit has intensified calls for the (re)unification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland into a 'United Ireland' (Evershed & Murphy, 2020). The overarching aim of this thesis is to explore how group identities and threats shape political preferences in the evolving Brexit context on the island of Ireland, with a particular focus on the growing push for Irish unity.

This thesis advances the state of the art by adopting a social identity approach to bridge theory with real-world application. It will investigate the ‘Brexit Effect’ on the island by examining identity and threats within the Brexit context. More specifically, the thesis will explore how identity is actively constructed by political leaders to shape the Brexit landscape for their agenda of a United Ireland, and how identity and threats, in turn, shape perceptions of the political context and preferences for Irish unity among different groups. By treating identity and threat both as constructs influenced by the context and as capable of shaping the social context, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between identity, threat, and political preferences in a unique context of contemporary political change.

In this opening chapter, the theoretical background and a general overview of previous research are presented. The theoretical background is broadly divided into two sections. The first section provides an overview of the social identity approach and integrated threat theory, with a particular focus on applying these theories to explain how identity and threat are relevant to political contexts. This provides the basis for Chapters 3 and 4. After these principles have been introduced, the second section explores how identity can be a source of social influence. In particular, how identity can be constructed by leaders for strategic purposes. It draws attention to the challenges leaders face in harnessing identity within contexts marked by deep divisions and hostility and introduces the social identity approach to intergroup leadership. This provides the basis for Chapter 2. After outlining the theoretical approaches and previous research that inform this thesis, an overview of the implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is provided, highlighting the distinct experiences of each context. This chapter then provides an overview of the present research, a rationale for the chosen methodology, a reflexivity statement, and ethical considerations. It concludes with an outline of the thesis structure.

1.2 Theoretical Background and Previous Research

The Social Identity Approach

This thesis draws on the social identity approach (SIA), a meta-theory consisting of social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorisation theory (SCT; Turner, et al., 1987). The SIA highlights the significance of group memberships in shaping how individuals perceive and respond to the world around them (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). In particular, being part of a group provides individuals with a set of norms, values and beliefs, through which they interact with and interpret the world. The SIA also demonstrates how leaders can manipulate these group norms, values and beliefs to advance their social and political agendas (Haslam et al., 2020; Reicher et al., 2005). Additionally, the SIA emphasises the importance of analysing broader social structures to understand group behaviour within specific contexts (Reicher, 2004). The SIA has been extensively applied to the analysis of political contexts (e.g., Huddy, 2013; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). The following sections will explore SIT and SCT in more detail.

Social Identity Theory

SIT states that people define their sense of self based on their memberships within various groups, ranging from family roles like being a sister or mother, to larger collectives like nationality, political affiliation, and ethnic groups (Tajfel, 1978). These group memberships provide a sense of belonging and contribute to an individual's social identity (Haslam et al., 2009).

When people value the groups to which they belong (i.e., their ingroups), they are motivated to emphasise the distinct identity of those groups and to uphold, protect, or enhance their positive value (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). For example, in Northern Ireland, Unionists display symbols like the Union Jack and celebrate British cultural events to assert

their distinct identity. Conversely, Nationalists use the Irish tricolour and participate in Irish cultural traditions to emphasise their distinct Irish identity (O'Donnell et al., 2016). The motivation to maintain a positive and distinct group identity has important implications for intergroup behaviour.

Intergroup Conflict

Particularly, the categorisation of individuals into ingroups and outgroups can lead to intergroup bias and discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). There is a tendency for group members to favour their own ingroup, and in some cases this can result in outgroup discrimination. Such discrimination serves to reinforce the ingroup's identity while devaluing the outgroup. In contexts of intergroup conflict, like Northern Ireland, these dynamics are particularly evident. Each group's identity is closely linked to territorial claims, making the outgroup's presence appear as a threat to their own identity. This perceived threat perpetuates a cycle of conflict and division (Kelman, 2001). Therefore, in such divided settings, identity not only defines group boundaries but also becomes a central driver of ongoing intergroup conflict.

Identity Management Strategies

To enhance their group's positive identity, group members can engage in various strategies (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT predicts that in threatening contexts, people will seek out 'cognitive alternatives' - opportunities for change within the existing social structure- if such opportunities are perceived as available (Reicher & Haslam, 2012). For instance, in the BBC prison experiment, prisoners began questioning their unequal status when exposed to alternative perspectives challenging the legitimacy of the prison system (Reicher & Haslam, 2006). Similarly, Iyer and colleagues (2017) found that students from disadvantaged background who were informed about better future opportunities for their group showed

improved academic performance and self-efficacy. These studies suggest that in situations where groups face threats, the availability of cognitive alternatives can transform these threats into opportunities for change (Reicher & Haslam, 2012). The current research expands upon this by examining the potential to perceive political opportunity in a context of Brexit threat (Chapter 3).

Self-Categorisation Theory

While there are many similarities between SIT and SCT (Hornsey, 2008), a key distinction is that SCT emphasises the cognitive processes explaining how individuals transition from identifying as an individual ‘I’ to identifying with a group ‘we’ (Turner et al., 1987). SCT predicts that group salience, which is the prominence of a group identity in a given situation, can lead people to think of themselves as group members rather than as individuals. The salience of a group identity is a function of the readiness to adopt an identity and the relevance of an identity to the situation (Turner & Reynolds, 2012).

Group identification reflects the psychological significance of the group to self (Leach et al., 2008). The strength of group identification is subjective and varies among individuals within the group. When group identification is strong, it more significantly influences how closely individuals adhere to the norms, values, and beliefs of their ingroup. Thus, stronger group identification leads to a greater influence of the group identity on an individual’s thoughts and actions (Turner et al., 1987).

Together then, SCT proposes that when the social context makes an identity salient, we are more likely to identify with it and act in accordance with that group identity (Turner & Reynolds, 2012). For example, following the Brexit referendum in Northern Ireland, which heightened the salience of political identities, there was an uptake in those identifying with the political identities Unionist or Nationalist, and strength of identification among

Nationalists reached its highest since the end of the Northern Ireland conflict in 1998 (Hayward & Rosher, 2020). This illustrates how social context can strengthen group identities.

Group Identification and Perceptions of the Political Context

Strength of group identification has important implications for shaping individuals' political behaviour (Huddy, 2001; 2013). Individuals with strong group identification are more likely to reinforce their group's political preferences and adhere to its norms, especially during times of political uncertainty and threat (Huddy et al., 2018; Huddy & Del Ponte, 2019; Loughnane et al., 2023). For example, following Brexit, people in Northern Ireland with strong Irish or British identities tended to perceive these groups as incompatible and polarised, aligning closely with the political norms and beliefs of their respective groups (Loughnane et al., 2023). As such, strong group identification, particularly with politicised groups, plays a crucial role in the development of political cohesion among group members, driving them toward a shared political outlook (Huddy, 2013).

Moreover, heightened identification can lead group members to act in ways that prioritise and advance their group's political goals (Huddy, 2001). Strong identifiers are more likely to view political realities in a way that favours their group during periods of uncertainty, such as having a stronger belief that their group will succeed in an election compared to those with weaker identification (Huddy et al., 2018). Additionally, previous research has shown that people with strong group identification are more likely to perceive threats to their group (Riek et al., 2006). As such, variations in the strength of identification are particularly relevant to understand how group members perceive and respond to the political reality. The current research examines how group identification influences perceptions of both threats and political opportunities in the context of Brexit (Chapter 3).

Integrated Threat Theory

Integrated threat theory, rooted in the social identity approach, indicates that there are two main types of threat perceived by groups- realistic and symbolic threats (Stephan & Stephan, 2002; Stephan et al., 2016). Realistic threats involve concerns about tangible resources and powers, such as economic stability and welfare. These threats arise when a group perceives that its material well-being or physical security is at risk due to the presence of an outgroup (Stephan & Stephan, 2002). On the other hand, symbolic threats refer to the perceived threats to a group's core values, beliefs, or ideology (Stephan et al., 2016). These threats emerge when the ingroup feels that its fundamental cultural or ideological beliefs are challenged or devalued by an outgroup, potentially undermining the group's identity (Stephan et al., 2016). The potential for Brexit to present realistic and symbolic threats to groups in Northern Ireland has been discussed (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). The current research provides the first examination of threats stemming from the Brexit context in both Northern Ireland (Chapter 3) and the Republic of Ireland (Chapter 4).

Threat and Political Preferences

Previous research has demonstrated the important role of perceived threats in shaping political preferences (e.g., Maher et al., 2023; Van de Vyver et al., 2018). For example, perceptions of threat from the COVID-19 pandemic have been linked to increased authoritarianism (Maher et al., 2023). Similarly, the 'leave' vote in the Brexit referendum was predicted by the threat of immigration among voters in England and Scotland (Van de Vyver et al., 2018). These studies highlight how perceived threats can influence political preferences by making certain policies or ideologies more appealing.

Building on this, recent theorising has introduced an 'affordance-based' model to describe the dynamic between threats and political preferences (Eadeh & Chang, 2020). This

model conceptualises political policies and ideologies as *affordances*, which are stimuli in the environment that offer opportunities to achieve specific goals (Gibson, 1977). According to this approach, individuals are more likely to support political policies and ideologies that they perceive as effective solutions to the threats they face (Eadeh & Chang, 2020). For instance, threats related to violence can increase support for culturally right-wing ideologies, whereas threats to healthcare-access can increase political liberalism (Brandt et al., 2021; Eadeh & Chang, 2020). This perspective marks a departure from more universal explanations of threat, such as the idea that threat uniformly increases right-wing political beliefs (e.g., Jost et al., 2003). Instead, the affordance-based model suggests that the impact of threat on political beliefs is context-specific, depending on the nature of the threat and the cultural and historical context (Brandt et al., 2021).

Supporting this approach, Brandt and colleagues (2021) conducted a comprehensive analysis across 56 countries and found that the relationship between perceived threats and political beliefs depends on the type of threat, the type of political belief, and the country. These findings highlight the value of considering both the specific type of threat and the local context when studying how threats influence political attitudes. Building on this framework, this research involves an experimental manipulation of the specific economic threat posed by Brexit, to assess its effect on support for a United Ireland in the Republic of Ireland (Chapter 4). In line with previous theorising, the research aims to determine whether heightened economic uncertainty due to Brexit affects support for the prospect of Irish unity among Irish people in the Republic of Ireland.

Economic Threat, National Identity and National Group Boundaries

During periods of economic uncertainty, national identities can strengthen (Shayo, 2009; 2020), and there can be increased resistance to including outsiders in the national group

(e.g., Jetten et al., 2015; Solt, 2008). Previous research indicates that as economic inequality rises - threatening a nation's economic stability- national identities can strengthen to reinforce a sense of security (Jay et al., 2019; Kinnvall, 2004; Shayo, 2009; 2020). Moreover, people become more resistant to newcomers joining their society compared to times of economic stability (Jetten et al., 2015). Therefore, the research investigates how economic threats impact not only political preferences but also national identity and perceptions of national group boundaries, offering a comprehensive account of how specific threats operate within distinct contexts (Chapter 4).

Group Identities and Social Influence

According to the social identity approach, group identities are ‘world-making things’ (Reicher et al., 2005, p.556), that shape the behaviours of large groups such as nations, religions, and political parties (Turner, 2005). These identities, whether national, political, or otherwise, are influenced by the wider social world and, in turn, have the power to shape society (Hopkins & Reicher, 2011). For example, the introduction of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, a major sociopolitical change that marked the end of the conflict in Northern Ireland, led to widespread shifts to the definition of group identities (Todd et al., 2005). For the first time, the Agreement allowed people to identify as British, Irish, or both, somewhat reducing the oppositional nature of these identities and contributing to more peaceful relations (Mac Ginty & Du Toit, 2007). The ability of group identities to shape behaviour and, by extension, society makes them a subject of debate and a tool for achieving social and political goals (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

Political leaders, concerned with shaping society, fashion group identities to align with their political agendas (e.g., Nightingale, 2018; Reicher et al., 2005; Vignoles et al, 2021). To achieve this, they articulate the group's core values, norms, and beliefs, providing

audiences with a sense of ‘who we are’ that corresponds with their political vision (Haslam et al., 2020; Reicher et al., 2005). Previous research demonstrates leaders strategically using identities to advance their political projects, addressing issues such as immigration (Nightingale et al., 2021; Portice & Reicher, 2018), managing the COVID-19 pandemic (Vignoles et al., 2021), and resisting repression (Jurstakova et al., 2023). The ability of leaders to shape people’s behaviour rests on their capacity to build a collective sense of ‘we’ between them and their followers (Steffens et al., 2014). Consequently, political leaders often invoke large group identities, such as national identity, to make their vision appeal to an entire community (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

However, in divided societies, attempts to lead different groups under a single identity are unlikely to be effective (Rast et al., 2018). National identities, which encompass each group's ideological beliefs and territorial claims, can threaten an ingroup's sense of positivity and distinctiveness in regions of intergroup conflict (Kelman, 2001). For example, in Northern Ireland, the conflicting British and Irish national identities are deeply rooted in historical disputes over the region's territory (Muldoon et al., 2007). Therefore, in such divided contexts, like the island of Ireland, leaders seeking political support across groups with entrenched intergroup divisions require careful consideration of intergroup dynamics and identity concerns (Hogg et al., 2012).

Leading in a Divided Context

Much research has explored how identity can be used to bridge intergroup divides, providing potential strategies for leaders in divided intergroup contexts. A widely recognised approach is the creation of a superordinate group identity that integrates multiple subgroups. The Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM), for example, seeks to redefine intergroup boundaries by transforming the perception of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ into a more inclusive ‘we’

(Gaertner et al., 1993). This model promotes unity by encouraging members of different groups to see themselves as part of a larger collective identity. However, challenges arise when the dominant group engages in ingroup projection, imposing its identity onto the superordinate group in ways that marginalise the lower status subordinate groups, which can lead to resistance and even exacerbate the intergroup divide (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Wenzel et al., 2003).

In contrast, the Dual Identity Model, proposed by Dovidio and colleagues (2009), recognises that not all group members are willing or are able to assimilate into a single superordinate identity. This model aims to preserve subgroup boundaries to prevent threats to identity distinctiveness. However, the Dual identity Model requires that subgroup members identify strongly with both their subgroup and the larger superordinate group. This dual identification can be problematic for minority subgroups, which often struggle to see themselves as part of the larger group due to historical or structural inequalities (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Wenzel et al., 2003). While both the CIIM and the Dual Identity Model have shown effectiveness in improving intergroup relations in various contexts (e.g., Hopkins, 2011; Riek et al., 2010), in settings marked by conflict and identity threats these models have been less effective (Kershaw et al., 2020a; Kershaw et al., 2020b; Rast et al., 2018).

The social identity theory of intergroup leadership (Hogg et al., 2012) offers an alternative approach for leaders in contexts characterised by hostile divisions and perceived threats. This theory suggests that leaders can enhance their effectiveness by promoting an intergroup relational identity, which acknowledges and embraces differences among groups while also emphasising a collaborative and positive interdependent relationship between them. Hogg and colleagues (2012) argue that by validating and respecting intergroup differences, leaders can reduce the perceived threat that arises when groups fear the loss of

their unique identity. Unlike the CIIM, which focuses on highlighting commonalities among groups, an intergroup relational identity addresses the complexities of intergroup dynamics by recognising the distinct roles and contributions of each group. Additionally, unlike the Dual Identity Model, an intergroup relational identity does not require or assume that members strongly identify with the superordinate and subgroup. Instead, the focus is on fostering a relationship between the two distinct groups, allowing them to maintain their uniqueness while working together. Experimental studies comparing the promotion of an intergroup relational identity to the CIIM and Dual Identity Model have shown that it can enhance leadership effectiveness ratings (Kershaw et al., 2021b; Rast et al., 2018) and improve intergroup relations (Kershaw et al., 2021a), in contexts of identity threat. Therefore, establishing a superordinate group defined by collaborative yet mutually distinct relationships between subgroups may enable leaders to build engagement in deeply divided contexts like post-conflict Ireland.

Place Identity as a Superordinate Identity

Place identity explores the relationship between people and their environment. It is an inherently interdisciplinary concept that draws on various fields. Social anthropology emphasises the symbolic meaning humans attach to places, creating a strong sense of belonging and attachment within communities (Low, 1992). Sociology focuses on how social groups and institutions interact with their surroundings, recognising both the social structure and emotional dimensions of place-person relationships (Cuba & Hummon, 1993). Human geography explores the human experience of place and has emphasised the emotional attachment people form with places (Relph, 2009), and environmental psychology studies the psychological processes involved in the relationship between people and places (Lewicka, 2011; Proshansky et al., 1983). Despite these varied approaches, these disciplines converge in

recognising that place is far more than a physical location - it plays a vital role in shaping people's identities (Bowe, 2012).

A superordinate group built through people's shared connection to a location can help preserve distinct subgroup identities (Abell et al., 2006; Neufeld & Schmitt, 2018). Qualitative research in Canada illustrates how the place-based overarching Aboriginal identity supports the protection of various Aboriginal subgroup cultures. Analysis of participants' constructions of the Aboriginal identity showed that this place identity not only enabled for the diversity of among subgroups to become a key aspect of the identity's meaning, but it also encouraged greater engagement across different Aboriginal cultures (Neufeld & Schmitt, 2018). Similarly, Abell and colleagues (2006) highlight how participants emphasised Great Britain's island status in order to unite the different nationalities sharing the island without diminishing people's sense of distinct English or Scottish national identity. Notably, these constructions of place varied, reflecting different political ideologies (Abell et al., 2006).

Indeed, like other forms of identity, place identity is not a static or neutral concept. It is actively constructed and often employed as a rhetorical tool to support political actions (Abell et al., 2006; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Hopkins & Dixon, 2006). As Dixon and Durrheim (2000) argue, places can become significant and contested areas of belonging, with place identity being harnessed to claim territorial rights, frame ideological perspectives, and assert control over landscapes. For example, their research offers insights into how people's connections to place were utilised to reinforce and maintain spatial segregation in the evolving landscape of post-apartheid South Africa (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). Similarly, Devine-Wright and Lyons (1997) explored the contested narratives surrounding totemic sites in Ireland, such as Trinity College, as a means to assert different versions of Irish identity. While those who identified with a more modern sense of Irishness celebrated Trinity College,

those who identified as more ‘traditional Irish’ held unfavourable views of the institution. According to the researchers, these negative attitudes are underpinned by the traditionalists’ broader opposition to British rule in Ireland- given that Trinity College was established by the British monarchy- revealing how places can become focal points for competing interpretations of national identity. Therefore, place identity can become a source of conflict among those who share attachments to the same location but hold differing interpretations of its meaning and significance.

Leaders Harnessing Historical (Dis)Continuity

Political leaders often draw upon history to shape group identities that align with their agendas (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). The way a group’s history is represented plays a crucial role in shaping its identity, influencing how members of the group perceive themselves and others, and how they respond to contemporary political issues (Liu & Hilton, 2005). These historical representations offer a narrative framework- often complete with heroes and villains- that can foster a sense of pride or victimhood to advance current political objectives (Liu & Hilton, 2005). Emphasising a pattern of historical injustice against one’s ingroup can mobilise group members to address these grievances (Freel & Bilali, 2022). For example, in their study of Argentinian activists, Chayinska and McGarty (2021) found that those who associated the silencing experienced during the 2017 elections with repression under the 1976-1983 dictatorship- experiencing a sense of ‘political déjà vu’- felt a stronger identification with the political opposition. Therefore, the ability of historical narratives to shape political attitudes and intergroup dynamics makes them a pertinent dimension of political discourse (Reicher, 2010).

Indeed, debates about the future trajectory of a group often hinges on whether the proposed path represents a continuation of (historical continuity) or a departure from

(historical discontinuity) its past identity (Reicher, 2010). In this way, history can be strategically used to support proposals about how the group should proceed in their future and the behaviours expected from group members. For example, portrayals of Scottish people as traditionally caring were strategically used by politicians to support different social policies. Labour politicians invoked this caring identity to justify a welfare state, while Conservatives used the same narrative to promote mutual self-reliance among Scots rather than state-led welfare (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Here, the idea of Scots being historically renowned for their caring nature was actively interpreted and constructed by leaders to connect this trait with modern political policies, presenting it as a continuation of historical values.

Historical continuity also provides people with a sense of stability, embedding them within a larger, temporally enduring group identity (Reicher, 2010). Previous research has highlighted the importance of this perceived sense of continuity, demonstrating that when group members view their group identity as stable and enduring, they tend to form a stronger sense of belonging and attachment (Sani et al., 2008; Sani et al., 2009). Existential threats to a group's identity make the significance of continuity even more pronounced and can lead to increased resistance to political changes perceived as threatening this continuity (Smeeke & Verkuyten, 2015). Therefore, during times of political change, fostering a sense of continuity, by linking the group's past to its future ideologies and goals, is likely to be an important task for leaders.

Conversely, leaders may strategically harness historical discontinuity to reshape a group's identity and align it with shifting political agendas. Historical discontinuity involves constructing narratives that break away from the past in order to mark a new beginning (Zerubavel, 1993). Recent research suggest that historical discontinuity may be particularly useful for group's in historically conflicted societies (Obradović & Bowe, 2021). Focus groups conducted in post-conflict Serbia identified two key functions of such narratives

(Obradović & Bowe, 2021). First, historical discontinuity allows for acknowledgment of a conflicted history without assuming group-level responsibility for past wrongdoings. By distancing groups from historical grievances, this narrative strategy helps avoid complexities of addressing the historical conflict directly (e.g., Murray & Durrheim, 2019; 2021). Second, historical discontinuity enables the expression of a desire to move beyond a divided past and work towards a more positive future for intergroup relations. Hence, in post-conflict societies, leaders may use discontinuity to break away from a conflicted past to help unify groups (e.g., Obradović & Bowe, 2021).

Leaders' rhetoric is key to defining group identities in line with their agendas (Hogg et al., 2012; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). However, the strategic construction of identities through rhetoric in divided contexts, where identity is contested, has been overlooked in the literature. This thesis aims to expand current theoretical understanding by exploring how political leaders harness identities to promote an agenda of Irish (re)unification in the divided context of the island of Ireland following Brexit. This investigation forms the focus of Chapter 2, aiming to provide insights into how leaders attempt to navigate and unify polarised identity positions in a context of historical conflict.

1.3 Context of the Research

Brexit Implications for Northern Ireland

Following Brexit there has been a decline in the number of people identifying as 'neutral' and an uptake in those identifying with the political identities Unionist or Nationalist in Northern Ireland (Hayward & Rosher, 2020). As mentioned previously, each of these groups holds differing claims regarding Northern Ireland's territory and constitutional status within the United Kingdom (UK) (Cairns & Darby, 1998; Çoymak & O'Dwyer, 2020). Unionists want Northern Ireland to remain within the UK, whereas Nationalists wish to be

(re)united with the rest of Ireland. Unionism and Nationalism refer to the competing political stances of each community, with Loyalism and Republicanism denoting the extremist version of these ideologies associated with paramilitary activities (Brown & Mac Ginty, 2003). These two communities are mostly segregated in terms of education, housing, work, and marriage and crossing the political divide is rare.

Northern Ireland endured thirty years of political instability and violent conflict, known as ‘The Troubles’, largely centred on this political issue of the region’s status as part of the UK (MacGinty et al., 2007). The negotiation of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, which underpins the peace process in Northern Ireland, offered Northern Ireland an opportunity to transcend its usual zero-sum mentality (Mac Ginty & Du Toit, 2007). The Peace Agreement states that Northern Ireland will remain part of the UK if a majority favour it, otherwise, it allows for a vote on (re)unification with the Republic of Ireland. This provision validated and expressed the ideological stances core to Unionism and Nationalism. EU membership supported the peace process by facilitating the free movement of goods and people across the contentious Ireland-Northern Ireland border and reducing its significance in daily life (Hayward & Murphy, 2018). The peace process in Northern Ireland led to promising changes suggestive of less polarised identities and improved cross-community relations (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014).

However, Brexit reignited these deep-seated identity divisions and provided another frontier to further polarise Unionists and Nationalists (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Without access to the EU single market, the contentious issue of the border resurfaced, along with the political question of Northern Ireland’s future within the UK, which fundamentally divides Unionists and Nationalists. A majority of Unionists voted to ‘leave’ the EU as they perceived Brexit as solidifying Northern Ireland’s position within the UK (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). While the majority of Nationalists voted to ‘remain’, this group now see Brexit as an

opportunity for (re)unification with the Republic of Ireland (Evershed & Murphy, 2021; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2021). Indeed, Nationalists are more expectant and in favour of Irish unity following Brexit (Hayward & Rosher, 2020). Thus, Brexit creates a context in which political ideologies for Ireland's future have returned as a point of contestation, igniting significant political and social unrest.

Brexit Implications for the Republic of Ireland

While Brexit in the Republic of Ireland is not as entwined with identity issues as it is in Northern Ireland, it has nonetheless resulted in significant political and economic implications. Given its shared border with Northern Ireland and close trading relationship with the UK, the Republic of Ireland was anticipated to be the EU member state most impacted by Brexit (Murphy, 2022). The loss of joint access to the EU single market and the question of the Irish border have particularly heightened worries about the economic stability and prosperity of businesses and people across Ireland (Hayward, 2021). Forecasts indicated that Brexit would negatively impact the Republic of Ireland's economy (Copenhagen Economics, 2018, 2020). Although the post-Brexit Northern Ireland Protocol, which prevents a reintroduction of a hard border on the island of Ireland, has mitigated some of these concerns, there remains ongoing uncertainty about the stability of the current trading arrangements (Hayward & Komarova, 2022). Consequently, Brexit continues to contribute to economic uncertainty for businesses and people in the Republic of Ireland.

Brexit Implications for a United Ireland

The concept of a United Ireland, which entails the (re)unification of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, represents a significant sociopolitical transformation aiming to consolidate two distinct territories and populations into a unified national group (see Garry et al., 2020 for potential models of a United Ireland). Legislation currently mandates that a

United Ireland can only be achieved through the consent of the majority in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, determined by simultaneous referendums held in both regions (Renwick & Kelly, 2021).

Brexit has been a pivotal moment for the constitutional future of Ireland (Todd, 2017). Northern Ireland's changed status as a non-EU member state has brought the possibility of a United Ireland to the forefront (Walsh, 2024). Studies indicate a growing trend of support for Irish (re)unification in the Republic of Ireland (Garry et al., 2022; Loscher, 2023). Similarly, evidence suggests shifting attitudes towards a United Ireland in Northern Ireland since Brexit (Hayward et al., 2022). This potential referendum, often referred to as a 'border poll', is a significant development that could redefine the political landscape of the island of Ireland

1.4 Present Research

Given the relevance of identity and threats in shaping the political landscape, and the prevalence of identity and threat concerns in relation to Brexit on the island of Ireland, the main research question addressed in this thesis is: 'How do group identities and the threat of Brexit shape preferences for Irish (re)unification in the island of Ireland?' To explore this question, the thesis utilises the social identity approach. This approach's emphasis on analysing social phenomena within their specific contexts (Reicher, 2004) provides a useful framework to examine Brexit in the distinct contexts of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The thesis is organised into three studies, each contributing distinct insights:

In line with previous research that group identities can be a tool for achieving political goals and that moments of societal change trigger changes to the definitions of identities, Chapter 2 explores how political leaders construct identity to advance their political agenda during a period of political upheaval triggered by Brexit. Chapter 2 extends previous

theorising by applying the social identity theory of intergroup leadership to the political context of the island of Ireland, focussing on how leaders strategically use identity for political transformation in a divided society. This research specifically examines how leaders of the largest Nationalist/Republican political party Sinn Féin, who opposed Brexit and viewed it as a threat, construct identities through their rhetoric to advance their agenda of Irish (re)unification following Brexit. By doing so, the research provides a novel application of intergroup leadership theory, offering the first qualitative analysis of how leaders use identities to pursue political goals in a real-world context characterised by historical conflict and threat.

Chapter 3 builds on Chapter 2 by investigating perceptions of Brexit as an opportunity for Irish (re)unification among those who identify with the political group Nationalist/Republican in Northern Ireland. Drawing on previous research that emphasises the role of salient and strong group identities, particularly political identities, in shaping perceptions of political events, Chapter 3 examines how the strength of Nationalist identification post-Brexit influences the view that Brexit could lead to Irish unity. Consistent with previous research showing that perceived threats can shift political preferences and be reinterpreted as opportunities when alternative future possibilities are available, this research also examines the connection between the perceived threat of Brexit and the perception of Brexit as an opportunity for a United Ireland. Therefore, Chapter 3 provides new insights into how group identification shapes perceptions of both threats and opportunities during times of political change and how perceptions of threat may be linked to perceptions of opportunity.

Chapter 4 experimentally manipulates the perception of Brexit as a threat to assess its impact on political preferences. Building on theories that suggest threats increase support for policies seen to address those threats, Chapter 4 examines how the economic threats associated with Brexit impact support for Irish (re)unification among Irish nationals in the

Republic of Ireland- a context where Brexit's economic consequences are a significant concern. This research aims to determine whether support for a United Ireland changes when Brexit's economic impact is framed as a threat. Additionally, as economic threats have been shown to strengthen national identification and narrow the inclusivity of national group boundaries, this research also explores how the economic threat posed by Brexit affects Irish identification and perceptions of national group boundaries, offering deeper insights into how Brexit economic threat operates within this context.

Therefore, in addition to the primary research question, the thesis has three aims:

- 1) To explore leaders' strategic use of identity for advancing the goal of a United Ireland on the island of Ireland, a historically divided society, where identity serves as a source of division.
- 2) To investigate whether viewing Brexit as an opportunity for Irish (re)unification is associated with heightened group identification and perceived threats among Nationalists and Republicans in Northern Ireland.
- 3) To determine whether economic threats posed by Brexit affect support for a United Ireland in the Republic of Ireland, and to examine the effect on Irish identification and perceptions of national group boundaries

Collectively, these three studies aim to address the overarching research question and aims of the thesis. As such, they all look at identity and threats in relation to preferences for Irish (re)unification in the Brexit context on the island of Ireland. Chapter 4 provides additional insights into the impact of Brexit threats on national identification and perceptions of national group boundaries. Despite their shared focus, each chapter adopts a different approach. Specifically, Chapter 2 examines identity as a source of social influence, exploring how leaders strategically utilise identity for political agendas. Chapter 3 examines how

identity, in particular identity strength, and perceived threats shape people's perceptions of the political reality. Chapter 4 experimentally investigates the impact of threats on political preferences. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of identity and threats in shaping the political landscape.

Given that group identification can both precede (e.g., Riek et al., 2006) and result from threat (e.g., Shayo, 2009; 2020), in this thesis, strength of group identification is examined as both an antecedent (Chapter 3) and consequence (Chapter 4) of Brexit threat (e.g., Doosje et al., 2002). In Northern Ireland, where group identities are deeply entrenched and identification with the Nationalist identity has notably increased following Brexit (Hayward & Rosher, 2020), Chapter 3 investigates how Nationalist identification is associated with perceptions of Brexit threat. Conversely, in the Republic of Ireland, where identities are less salient compared to Northern Ireland, Chapter 4 explores whether Irish identification results from the economic threat posed by Brexit. Each chapter provides a detailed discussion of the specific dynamics between group identification and Brexit threat within its respective context.

It is important to note that the current research was driven by the evolving context where Brexit, initially seen as a threat and opposed by Nationalists, is now increasingly seen as an opportunity to achieve a United Ireland. As a result, this thesis focuses on Brexit from the perspective of Nationalists/Republicans and Irish nationals in the Republic of Ireland. Consequently, the experiences and perspectives of Unionists and Loyalists were not explored within the scope of this research.

1.5 Methodology

This thesis employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to address its research question and aims. A mixed methods approach enables a comprehensive

exploration of various aspects of the same research question (Todd et al., 2004). Guided by previous research exploring the strategic construction of identity (e.g., Nightingale et al., 2021; Reicher et al., 1996a; Reicher et al., 1996b), Chapter 2 utilises a qualitative analysis to explore political leaders constructing identities for their agenda of Irish (re)unification following Brexit. In Studies 2 (Chapter 3) and 3 (Chapter 4), quantitative methods are utilised to investigate the strength and direction of relationships between group identification, perceptions of Brexit threat, and preferences for a United Ireland. Therefore, combining qualitative and quantitative methods allows this research to examine how identity and threats are actively constructed by political leaders to shape the political landscape, and how identity and threats, in turn, are linked to perceptions of the political context and political preferences among different groups.

A mixed methods approach capitalises on the strengths and minimises the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Quantitative research is particularly well-suited for testing hypotheses derived from theoretical perspectives and for generalising findings across larger populations (Doyle et al., 2009). Increasingly, quantitative studies are being pre-registered, which enhances transparency and the credibility of research findings (Munafò et al., 2017). In the current research, quantitative methods enabled the examination of hypothesised relationships between the variables of interest, with Study 3 (Chapter 4) being pre-registered to ensure a rigorous and transparent research process. Additionally, the data and materials for each of the studies are available on the Open Science Framework.

Qualitative research departs from this positivist approach and allows for a constructionist perspective that views identities, meanings, and realities, as actively constructed (Potter, 1996). This approach was crucial for exploring the strategic function of identity, particularly how political leaders construct identities for political agendas. Speeches

to annual conferences are particularly significant, as they provide leaders with a platform to define and promote their political vision (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996b). Political rhetoric can shape mass actions by influencing how group identities are constructed and perceived (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996b; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Therefore, a qualitative analysis of political speeches is essential for understanding how leaders attempt to influence society.

Taken together, this thesis employs a combination of research methods. Study 1 (Chapter 2) conducts a rhetorical analysis of leaders' speeches, Study 2 (Chapter 3) involves two cross-sectional survey studies, and Study 3 (Chapter 4) is a pre-registered experiment. Making use of this diverse range of qualitative and quantitative methods has been noted to yield superior research compared to a monomethod approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

The research included in this thesis received ethical approval from the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (2020_10_06_EHS) and adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. In Studies 2 (Chapter 3) and 3 (Chapter 4), all participants provided informed consent and had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants' responses were anonymised and kept confidential. After participation, participants were fully debriefed and provided with contact information for any questions regarding the research. Notably, ethical approval was not required for Study 1 (Chapter 2), as it involved the analysis of publicly available leaders' speeches.

Reflexivity Statement

Having employed qualitative methods, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of the researcher in the research process. Similarly, recognising positionality in quantitative research is increasingly considered best practice. Our biases and perspectives are inherently

intertwined with the research we undertake. Therefore, my personal journey in conducting this research is significant in understanding how it may have influenced the process.

I was born in Birmingham and grew up in a close-knit Irish Catholic community, attending Catholic schools where almost everyone had Irish parents or grandparents. Most summers and holidays were spent visiting family in Donegal. Naturally, I do not feel very 'English', but rather some sort of mix between British and Irish. However, my nationality was not something I regularly pondered. It wasn't until I went on a backpacking trip that my national identity became more salient. In hostel small talk, people would ask each other where they are from. Saying the 'UK' felt inadequate to convey my identity. Once, when someone with a Scottish accent asked, I specified 'England', because the UK superordinate group would obviously not be sufficient to a fellow subgroup member. This was met with a light-hearted 'booing' and created an intergroup dynamic where my Englishness was positioned as an outgroup to their Scottishness, even though I didn't feel comfortable labelling myself as English. After that interaction, I let my partner handle the question, allowing him to say we were from Ireland, leveraging his Irish accent to fit into that group.

In 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, I moved to Ireland to begin my PhD. Since moving, my accent places me on the outskirts of the Irish group. While I hope to permanently settle in Ireland, my accent may always create barriers to being fully accepted as Irish. As a result, I was drawn to study the issue of identity, particularly in the context of Brexit, as it challenged people's sense of identity.

Studying the social identity approach in-depth during my PhD has helped me understand how identities, including my own, shape our perception of the world. I've learned that in different contexts, such as attending a Birmingham City football match where I think of myself as a 'Brummie', or among a room of English football fans where I see myself as

'Irish', my identity can shift. This fluidity is something I may have taken for granted. However, in Northern Ireland, moving between identities like British and Irish or Unionist and Nationalist is less common, and the boundaries between these groups are not as permeable. These identities are underpinned by competing ideologies, which shape and constrain identity dynamics in a more rigid manner.

This informed my decision to focus on the experiences of Nationalists/Republicans in Northern Ireland. When I began my PhD in 2020, their calls for Irish unity in response to Brexit were gaining traction, while Unionists grappled with Boris Johnson's unfulfilled promises and the implications of the Irish Sea border. These contrasting experiences prompted me to seek a thorough understanding of this complex issue through the lens of identity.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

Following this introductory chapter, the empirical chapters that comprise this thesis are organised into three chapters, each addressing different aspects of the research question. In the discussion sections of Studies 1 and 2, there is a reflection on the insights gained from each study and an explanation of how these insights informed the design of the subsequent study. This is to provide a coherent link between the chapters as they move from different methodological approaches, contexts and variables. The final chapter discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the findings from the preceding studies, highlights their limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

To conclude, this thesis applies the social identity approach to understand the unfolding political event of Brexit on the island of Ireland. A social psychological approach was utilised as it provides a comprehensive framework to explore how group identities and threats are shaping the political landscape on the island of Ireland in the aftermath of Brexit.

By applying the approach to a context of contemporary political change, this thesis generates new theoretical and practical insights. In an era where modern politics is increasingly unpredictable and volatile, this thesis is both timely and significant for grasping the nature of contemporary political shifts.

CHAPTER TWO

Leading from the Past to the Future: Harnessing Place Identity for Political Transformation in
a Divided Context

Abstract

Leaders can use identities as tools to promote their political agendas. This study examines how leaders strategically harness identities for political transformation in a divided society. We analysed leaders' speeches delivered by the political party Sinn Féin in the island of Ireland. Sinn Féin leveraged Brexit uncertainties to advance their goal of (re)unifying Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland into a 'United Ireland'. However, achieving this goal requires support across the polarised identity positions in Ireland. We identified two themes that highlight the leaders constructing (i) 'political déjà vu' to portray Brexit as a collective issue posed by Britain for Ireland, (ii) a new place-based superordinate group, built through people's shared attachment to Ireland, as a unifying way to present their vision for a United Ireland. Historical discontinuity enabled new identities and intergroup relations. Discussion highlights the potential for place identity and historical discontinuity in societies entrenched in historical conflict.

Key words: intergroup leadership; place identity; historical discontinuity; intergroup relations; divided societies

Introduction

Leaders often harness social identities to advance their specific political agendas (e.g., Jurstakova et al., 2023; Nightingale, 2021; Vignoles et al., 2021). However, the ways in which leaders use identities to promote their political project in a divided society has been largely overlooked in the psychological literature. Creating a cohesive sense of ‘us’ among diverse audiences is a fundamental task for leaders (Haslam et al., 2020). Yet, in contexts marked by conflict and hostility, uniting polarised groups poses unique challenges due to intergroup dynamics (Hogg et al., 2012) and historical tensions (Obradović & Bowe, 2021). In such contexts, the task of leadership and identity positioning is likely to be more difficult. In the present study we aimed to explore how political leaders utilise identities to articulate a vision for political change within a deeply divided context entrenched in historical conflict. We focussed on political leaders in Ireland, specifically those from the Sinn Féin party, as they seek to achieve their political objective of (re)unifying Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland into a ‘United Ireland’.

Leaders Harnessing Identity in a Divided Context

Leaders shape the identities of large social categories, such as political parties or nations, to align with their desired vision for society (Haslam et al., 2020; Reicher et al., 2005). For instance, national leaders will define the national identity group, in terms of who belongs and what it means to belong, in a way that supports their political interests (Reicher & Hopkins, 2000, 2001). Yet in deeply divided societies, the ability to establish a shared collective identity among audiences is hampered by disputes and contestations surrounding identity (Kelman, 2001). National identities can be highly contentious, as they are imbued with competing narratives of each group’s history and claims to territory, which inherently threatens the other group (Kelman, 2001). Therefore, in divided societies promoting

collective identities can enhance threat and intergroup conflict (Crisp et al., 2006; Hogg et al., 2012).

Even approaches like a ‘dual identity’, which aim to preserve subgroup identities within a superordinate group (Dovidio et al., 2009), can be ineffective in contexts of heightened identity threat (Kershaw et al., 2021b). While a dual identity can improve intergroup relations in some contexts (e.g., Hopkins, 2011), it may not succeed universally. For example, in Northern Ireland, adopting a superordinate Northern Irish identity failed to diminish the political division between Catholic and Protestant subgroups, reflecting entrenched intergroup divisions (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014). Consequently, leadership in such intergroup contexts requires careful consideration of social identity concerns and intergroup dynamics (Hogg et al., 2012).

The social identity theory of intergroup leadership proposes that in contexts where identities pose a threat to each other, it is essential to acknowledge and accept intergroup differences as part of the superordinate group (Hogg, 2015; Hogg et al., 2012). By appreciating these differences between subgroups and emphasising their interdependence, the intergroup relationship itself becomes a defining aspect of the superordinate group (Hogg et al., 2012). Promoting a superordinate group based on collaborative yet distinct relationships between groups in identity-threatening contexts can enhance intergroup relations and leaders' effectiveness (Kershaw et al., 2021a; Kershaw et al., 2021b; Rast et al., 2018). Therefore, attending to the intergroup relationship may be an important feature of building engagement in divided societies. However, how political leaders may utilise such an identity has not yet been explored.

The physical environment may provide leaders with a platform to establish a sense of ‘us’ among divided audiences. Research conducted among English and Scottish nationals in

the UK shows how discussions about the country's status as an 'island' were used to create a superordinate group based on shared geographical location (Abell et al., 2006). By referencing the physical geography of the UK, speakers could bring together the plurality of nationalities in the UK without diminishing their distinct Scottish and English identities, thereby highlighting a sense of interconnectedness through common location. Similarly, a superordinate group built around people's shared connection to place can help protect the cultural traditions of different groups (Neufield & Schmitt, 2018). Hence, place identity may be particularly relevant for leaders aiming to unite diverse identities with distinct cultural traditions.

Historical Narratives and Identity Construction

Leaders often draw upon history to align with their political agenda (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Historical narratives serve as strategic tools to unite identities and shape future trajectories (Freel & Bilali, 2022; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Reicher, 2010). For instance, narratives of ongoing historical injustice attribute responsibility for wrongdoings to a specific outgroup to unite people against the perceived perpetrators (Javeline, 2003; Freel & Bilali, 2022). These narratives that portray a continuity of injustice serve to emphasise the need to collectively address and overcome these wrongs in the present (Freel & Bilali, 2022). A leader may therefore draw parallels between past and present – creating a sense of 'political déjà vu' (Chayinska & McGarty, 2021) - to advocate for unity and change.

Leaders may also choose to end a particular history and mark a new beginning for identities, known as historical discontinuity (Zerubavel, 1993). Narratives of historical discontinuity can be strategically employed for the benefit of the ingroup (Obradović & Bowe, 2021; Roth et al., 2017). Discontinuing the past can allow for the acknowledgment of a conflicted history without assuming group-level responsibility for past wrongdoings

(Obradović & Bowe, 2021; see also Murray & Durrheim, 2019; 2021). Notably, recent research conducted in Serbia, a society that has experienced several recent socio-political changes and conflicts, suggests historical discontinuity can help identities move beyond a divided past (Obradović & Bowe, 2021). As such, historical discontinuity may have the potential to create a more positive future for intergroup relations in post-conflict societies. Taken together, historical narratives, whether emphasising continued injustices or discontinuing the past, are deliberately constructed to reinforce a leader's ideology (Reicher, 2010) and aspirations for the future (Obradović & Bowe, 2021; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

Context

The island of Ireland provides a unique opportunity to explore how political leaders articulate their political agenda to diverse and divided identities in an identity-threatening context. Sinn Féin, an Irish Republican political party in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, has sought to capitalise on the uncertainties surrounding Brexit to advance their objective of (re)unifying Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland into a United Ireland (Evershed & Murphy, 2022). Despite originally opposing Brexit and viewing it as a threat (Evershed & Murphy, 2021), the President of Sinn Féin later referred to it as the “opportunity of a lifetime” (Libreri, 2020). However, achieving Irish unity requires the support of deeply divided identity groups in Ireland. The marked social division and history of intergroup conflict between Unionists and Republicans in Northern Ireland (Ferguson & McKeown, 2016; Mac Ginty et al., 2007) presents a significant challenge for Sinn Féin in bridging this intergroup divide. Notably, the concept of a United Ireland inherently threatens Unionists who support Northern Ireland's continued status within the UK (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Moreover, there are divisions within the Irish population, both geographically and in terms of their understanding of their national Irish identity, between those residing in the Republic of Ireland and those in Northern Ireland (Stevenson &

Muldoon, 2010; Todd et al., 2006). Furthermore, contrasting ideas about borders and governance stemming from the formation of the Irish nation-state have contributed to different views regarding a United Ireland (for an overview see Hayward, 2013).

However, growing support for a United Ireland is evident in polls conducted in both the Republic of Ireland (Loscher, 2023) and Northern Ireland (Hayward et al., 2022). This includes some Unionists, who, in the aftermath of Brexit, have become more ambivalent about Northern Ireland's position within the union (Todd, 2021). This suggests that Sinn Féin's political goal may be gaining momentum, making their need to speak to these different constituencies more pressing.

Present Study

In the present study, we aimed to explore how leaders harness identity to drive political transformation within the divided context of the island of Ireland. Specifically, we investigated how a vision of a United Ireland is advanced by Sinn Féin leaders in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland following Brexit (2016-2022). We explored how the leaders strategically constructed identities to further their vision of Irish unity among divided audiences. Given the potential for historical narratives to transform identities and intergroup relations in historically conflicted societies (Obradović & Bowe, 2021), we examined the version of history invoked by these leaders.

Method

Data Corpus

The dataset for the study comprised speeches given by the President and Vice President of Sinn Féin at their annual conferences (Ard Fheis) from June 2016 to 2022, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill share the leadership of Sinn Féin. Mary Lou McDonald is the President of Sinn Féin and an elected

politician in the Republic of Ireland, and Michelle O'Neill is the Vice President of Sinn Féin and elected politician and representative in Northern Ireland.

Speeches to annual conference are a key opportunity for leaders to define their political agenda (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996b). The inclusion criteria were all speeches given by these leaders at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis between 2016-2022. The Ard Fheis was not held in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and in 2016 the Ard Fheis was held before the Brexit referendum. Thus, a total of five speeches from each leader were included in the dataset. The materials for the study are in Appendix 1 and available at:

https://osf.io/dqkc8/?view_only=6d7d2decfb284a72a0f75dccea444c3c

Analytic Procedure

The present analysis utilised a rhetorical psychology analysis (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a; 1996b). Situated within the broader framework of discourse analysis (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987), rhetorical psychology approaches discourse as strategic communicative action (Condor et al., 2013). Our analysis focused on the rhetorical strategies used by leaders to construct identities in line with their political agenda (e.g., Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004; Nightingale et al., 2021; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996b). By treating social identities as a rhetorical phenomenon and site of debate, we examined what the speakers are trying to achieve through their rhetoric (e.g., Nightingale et al., 2021; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010), including how they reinforced their own agenda while undermining the opposing position (Billig, 1987). Additionally, we explored what was unsaid or avoided by the leaders in their speeches, as this reflects potential ideological motivations (Murray & Durrheim, 2019; 2021). Our analysis contextualised discourse within its broader social and historical context (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

Furthermore, we integrated tools from Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) to structure our analytic process. Given that rhetorical analysis does not prescribe a specific methodological technique (Condor et al., 2013), thematic analysis provided us with a structured framework to conduct our analysis. Initially, the analysis followed a deductive, theory-driven approach, using the social identity approach to leadership to understand how leaders employed identity strategies to gain support for their political agendas (Haslam et al., 2020; Reicher et al., 2005). However, as the analysis progressed, an inductive approach was adopted, using theoretical insights from the literature to interpret the rhetorical strategies observed in the data.

We approached the analysis within a social constructionist epistemology (Potter, 1996), which posits that knowledge, meanings, and identities are socially constructed. Through this lens, we interpreted the political speeches not as reflections of reality but as tools through which leaders shape and negotiate social realities. This perspective allowed us to explore the ways in which the leaders actively constructed and contested meanings and identities within their political discourse.

Regarding the subjectivities of the researchers, it is important to acknowledge that the research team consists of white female researchers affiliated with an Irish university. The first author, responsible for the data analysis, identifies as British-Irish and has primarily lived in the UK, but currently resides in Ireland. The second author, also responsible for data analysis, is Irish and spent a significant portion of their adult life in Northern Ireland having lived there through some of the worst period of the Northern Ireland conflict. We approached this analysis as conversant with Brexit and Irish history, while having no affiliation to any political party. The third author is German and similarly has no allegiance to any political party.

Procedure

The complete speeches delivered by the leaders were available as videos on YouTube. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2021) six-step recursive procedure to organise the data. The first author, as lead analyst, transcribed the speeches verbatim and engaged deeply with the data through repeated listening and reading, ensuring thorough familiarity with the material. Employing a rhetorical psychology lens, the first author independently coded the data, using the comment function in Microsoft Word, with a full list of codes provided in the Appendix 1. Through this process, the first author identified key extracts that illustrated important features of the data, serving as the foundation for theme development.

To construct the overarching themes, the first and second authors collaboratively reviewed and organised the codes and extracts, guided by the first author's initial framework. Selected extracts were chosen to illustrate each theme's nuances, with feedback from the third author enhancing the clarity and coherence of the themes in relation to the research aim. Further refinement, directed by past literature (inductive) and informed by the first author's theoretical framework (deductive) continued throughout the write-up process.

Analysis

The analysis highlighted two interdependent themes of rhetorical strategies used by the leaders. The first theme explores how the Sinn Féin leaders use a historical narrative to construct Brexit as an 'us' in Ireland versus 'them' in Britain identity dynamic. The leaders use references to history to highlight Britain as an ongoing problem in Ireland. In this way, they attempted to unite the people of Ireland in opposition to 'them' Britain. In the second theme, the leaders propose putting an end to Ireland's divided history and present their vision for a future United Ireland. They introduce a new place identity rooted in people's shared attachment to the island of Ireland. By doing so, they attempt to create a place-based

superordinate group among the diverse and divided identities in Ireland. Thus, the leaders attempt to appeal to their audiences on an ingroup basis when discussing the past but address the diversity of identities in Ireland when envisioning the future.

Theme 1: Brexit as political déjà vu: “It will not become Ireland’s problem”.

Theme 1 focuses on how both the Sinn Féin leaders, Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O’Neill, construct Brexit as a form of political déjà vu on the part of the British government. Tailored to their respective audiences, the two leaders employed different strategies to evoke a sense of political déjà vu. They use appeals to history to construct Britain as a common outgroup to ‘us’ in Ireland. By doing so, they seek to unite the people of Ireland in opposition to what they portray as ongoing pattern of problematic actions by the British government.

Extract one is drawn from Michelle O’Neill’s speech to Sinn Féin’s Ard Fheis on 15th November 2019. In this extract, O’Neill refers to the past, to the partition of Ireland in 1921. Partition followed from the Boundary Commission and was agreed by the British government and the Irish Free State (Rankin, 2007). Here, O’Neill uses partition to create an ideologically charged historical narrative: Brexit is akin to partition of old that divided the people of Ireland, and the British government are again to blame.

Extract 1 (Michelle O’Neill addresses Sinn Féin’s Ard Fheis 15/11/2019)

We have lived a century apart, and partition has failed us all. It has reinforced segregation, division and inequality. And the Brexit being imposed on us today serves to further that division.

O’Neill frames partition as a failure and emphasises the longevity of this problematic decision as “a century apart”. She orientates to the division of Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland, which constitute two separate countries, and overlooks the marked

division of the Unionist and Republican identity groups within Northern Ireland. By using inclusive language such as “we have lived” and “us all”, she is addressing everyone in Ireland, including her Sinn Féin supporters in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. She is constructing partition as an enduring problem for “us” in Ireland.

O'Neill holds the British government accountable for partition even though the Boundary commission also included representatives of the Irish Free State (Rankin, 2007). This historical narrative is strategic as it enables O'Neill to utilise political *déjà vu* to portray Brexit as yet another unjust and undemocratic decision by the British government in Ireland. By using the conjunction "And" to connect her explanation of these two distinct political events, she connects the British government's past actions (the partition of Ireland) with Brexit “today”. This serves to emphasise that Brexit is just the latest in a long line of bad decisions made by Britain to Ireland's cost. Furthermore, O'Neill's description of “Brexit being imposed on us” portrays the British government as oppressive. Through this rhetoric, O'Neill links historical events and Brexit, reinforcing the narrative that the British government's actions are oppressive and undemocratic to the people of Ireland.

Extract two is taken from Michelle O'Neill's speech to Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis on 30th November 2021. O'Neill discusses the Northern Ireland Protocol, which is a post-Brexit agreement designed to prevent the need for physical border infrastructure between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (European Council, 2023). She expresses support for the Protocol and claims that it is supported by a majority in Northern Ireland. However, she presents the British government's political agenda, during the ongoing negotiations with the European Union, as the latest instance of questionable actions on their part.

Extract 2 (Michelle O'Neill addresses Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis 30/11/2021)

However, the new red lines set out by the British government begs the question do they want a solution at all? But we'll soon see. The British State also want to continue to hide their role during the conflict here. They remain intent on introducing an amnesty to protect British soldiers who murdered Irish citizens here.

Here, O'Neill elides the past with the present. She connects the actions of the current "British government" with those of the "British state" during the previous conflict in Northern Ireland (1969-1998), known as the 'Troubles'. Her use of the word "also" allows her to make this transition from past to present and pluralises Britain's corruption, suggesting a pattern of problematic behaviour. Essentially, she offers Britain's role in the conflict as a benchmark for British political behaviour. This enables her to present Britain as so untrustworthy that not only are they willing to harm Irish people, but also see no need to prosecute those who killed Irish citizens during the conflict.

Indeed, O'Neill's statement about Britain protecting "British soldiers who murdered Irish citizens" illustrates her portrayal of Britain acting against the interests of Ireland and its people. The Troubles are, therefore, used as emblematic of not only the threat Britain presents to Irish people but also the extent of British state corruption.

This depiction of Britain as complicit in murdering "Irish citizens" surpasses the mistrust presented in extract one (Britain as undemocratic and divisive). Here, O'Neill positions the identities of Irish and British in terms of the Northern Ireland conflict. Yet, in both accounts of the conflict, in extract one and two, there is no mention of the IRA (the Irish Republican Army- a paramilitary organisation) campaign against British rule in Ireland, which also led to the deaths of Irish (and British) civilians (Mac Ginty et al., 2007). Mention of violence against the Irish community by the Loyalist paramilitaries (fighting against Irish rule in Northern Ireland) is also omitted. What is not said is also a social action (Murray &

Durrheim, 2019; 2021). This construction of the conflict reflects O'Neill's ideological agenda to portray Britain as the key threat for Ireland and Irish people.

Through her repetitive signalling of the "British" identity to depict the "British government", "British state" and "British soldiers", she is clearly highlighting Britain as the source of the problem. Further, by emphasising that "they" and "their" wrongdoings took place "here", she distinguishes Britain as a separate and foreign 'other', and people, to Ireland and the Irish. Her use of the word "citizens", emphasises that these victims had human rights that were ignored by British forces, further emphasising Britain as the perceived oppressor in her narrative.

In extract three, Mary Lou McDonald addresses Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis on 17th June 2018. McDonald claims that Brexit has brought the partition of Ireland, and the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, back into the political spotlight. She outlines Ireland's interests in this context, which include avoiding a hard border in Ireland (with associated physical infrastructure to monitor and process the movement of people and goods), preserving the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and protecting citizens' rights. She expresses mistrust towards the British government and their ability to represent the interests of Ireland, aiming to unite the people of Ireland to protect their collective interests.

Extract 3 (Mary Lou McDonald addresses Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis 17/6/18)

Propping up a Tory government that glories in wilful ignorance and indifference to Ireland is not the way forward. Allowing the Tories to dodge, equivocate and engage in fantasy non-solutions to the Irish question is certainly not the answer. If the architects of Brexit still can't agree what Brexit looks like, well that's their problem. It will not become Ireland's problem.

Political déjà vu is evoked when McDonald refers to the “Irish question”. The phrase- the Irish question- has been used since the 19th century in British politics to refer to the handling of Irish Nationalism and calls for Irish independence (Boyce, 1996). As such, it is imbued with history and is a phrase that invokes a British imperialist approach to Ireland. Here, McDonald employs the phrase to connect Ireland’s historical struggle with Britain to the current Brexit context, highlighting the ongoing challenges Ireland faces in its relationship with Britain.

By emphasising that Ireland is being affected by decisions made by the “Tory government” despite not being directly involved in the Brexit process, McDonald is using Brexit to support her broader narrative about the relationship between Ireland and Britain. This narrative includes the idea that decisions made by the British government have historically had negative consequences for Ireland- “Ireland’s problem”, and a United Ireland is a more desirable outcome.

In comparison to O’Neill, who speaks more broadly about the historically problematic British government and British state in Ireland, McDonald’s criticism of Britain in this instance is limited. It focuses solely on the contemporary Conservative political party known as “the Tories”, and the politicians who supported Brexit. This reflects the role of each leader and the audiences they are trying to reach. O’Neill as the leader in Northern Ireland, speaks to a constituency beleaguered by historically tense relations between Britain and Ireland. Irish Republicans in Northern Ireland have felt the ongoing impact of the Troubles and Britain’s sovereignty over Northern Ireland. On the other hand, McDonald, as well as speaking to people in Northern Ireland, is also speaking to a larger population in the Republic of Ireland, where Ireland’s relationship with Britain is more tempered. She avoids discussing the conflict and the British state as problematic in Ireland. This may be because she wants to avoid exclusion of the political middle ground in the Republic of Ireland, where the violence and

conflict of dissident Irish Republicans in Northern Ireland has been viewed as unacceptable and not representative of their Irish identity (Todd et al., 2006). Moreover, with a significant population of UK citizens residing in the Republic of Ireland and the strong economic, social, and familial ties between the two nations, McDonald moderates her portrayal of Britain to appeal to her audience in the Republic of Ireland.

Theme 2: Who we could become: “Everyone who shares this island”.

Theme 2 explores how the Sinn Féin leaders articulate their vision for future Irish unity. There is a clear shift in their discourse as they look to the future and propose moving forward from Ireland’s divided past. In comparison to Theme 1, in which the leaders portrayed Britain as a common outgroup and attempt to appeal to audiences in Ireland as an ingroup, in this theme, the leaders create a place-based superordinate group as a platform to speak to audiences across intergroup divides in Ireland.

Extract four is taken from Michelle O’Neill’s speech to Sinn Féin’s Ard Fheis on 15th November 2019. In this extract, O’Neill references the historical event of partition again, but this time to emphasise the need to move forward. She alludes to Ireland’s status as an island to construct a place-based identity among its inhabitants.

Extract 4 (Michelle O’Neill addresses Sinn Féin’s Ard Fheis 15/11/2019)

As we approach the centenary of partition let’s not refight battles of the past. Let’s look to the future. Let’s present our vision for a new and agreed Ireland. Let’s address the concerns of those who are fearful of change. We want reunification not just for Republicans but for everyone who shares this island. This is not about victories; this is about something better for us all.

In extract one, O’Neill referenced partition to portray Britain as an ongoing problem for people in Ireland. However, in this subsequent extract from the same speech, O’Neill

recontextualises partition, portraying it as a moment to “look to the future” and leave Ireland’s divided past behind. She references the “centenary of partition” as a milestone where sectarianism is depicted as a “battle[s] of the past”, laying the groundwork for her vision of Irish “reunification”, which presumably transcends sectarian divisions. Therefore, O’Neill strategically uses the term partition in her discourse, first to depict a continued history of injustices attributed to Britain, and then to advocate for a departure from this history towards a “new and agreed Ireland.”

O’Neill departs from the zero-sum mentality of “victories” and intergroup rivalry that have characterised identities in Northern Ireland in the past (Muldoon et al., 2007b; Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010). Instead, she acknowledges and includes those with “concerns” regarding a United Ireland and encourages calm engagement from her assumedly Republican followers. Rather than directly addressing the polarised perspectives of Republicans and Unionists (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014), she seeks to minimise their differences. In doing so, O’Neill avoids emphasising divisions and offers this political position as one that is capable of bringing people together. She is, therefore, depicting Irish unity as a vehicle for engagement, dialogue, and inclusivity.

O’Neill explicitly references Ireland’s geographical status as an island to naturalise a people-place relationship among its inhabitants. She uses “this island” trope to construct the people of Ireland as a collective by virtue of their common geographical location (Abell et al., 2006). In doing so, O’Neill creates a place-based identity rooted in people’s shared inhabitation of the island of Ireland, enabling her to build a superordinate group without invoking potentially divisive national or political identities. Moreover, her use of the word “shares” implies an interdependent collaborative relationship among the people of Ireland. O’Neill harnesses this place-based identity as a unifying way to present her vision for a United Ireland.

Extract five is taken from Mary Lou McDonald's speech to Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis on 17th June 2018. In this extract, McDonald looks to the future to envision harmonious intergroup relations. She brings divided groups together through references to the physical landscape and actively addresses intergroup divisions in Ireland. However, her vision of a harmonious future in a United Ireland is impeded by a lack of clarity on the necessary steps to achieve this goal.

Extract 5 (Mary Lou McDonald addresses Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis 17/06/2018)

Our new Ireland allows us all to live in harmony under the one free sky in the place that we call home. And this new Ireland must be home for Unionists. We need to understand that. We need to find ways to talk about the future. We need to find ways to reconcile the past. And these aren't easy things to do. Because people have suffered, were hurt, endured pain, inflicted pain. And we can't make that go away but we can say sorry to each other. And I believe it is important that we do.

McDonald presents a vision of how a "new Ireland" will be a place to "live in harmony". Her depiction of inclusion and freedom through her reference to the "one free sky" implies that the "sky" in Ireland was divided, perhaps even unfree or enslaved. Hence, by referring to the future, she is acknowledging that harmony has not been a defining feature of Ireland in the past. It is a purposefully vague allusion to the tensions of the past in order to mark the potential beginning of a new history.

McDonald draws on the physical landscape of Ireland to establish a superordinate group that includes everyone in Ireland - "us all". She highlights the shared attachment that people across Ireland have to the same geographical "place" as the foundation for this group. Through the phrase, "we call home", McDonald emphasises a common psychological connection among the collective that inhabit Ireland, thereby elevating their shared

geographical location to a source of belonging and identity. The physical landscape serves as a platform to establish a group that is inclusive of everyone in Ireland. She positions a “new” United Ireland as the space that “allows” for the integration of different groups in Ireland into a harmonious group. Hence, McDonald is constructing the concept of (re)unifying Ireland as an opportunity for harmony, despite Ireland’s national status being a central source of conflict and division in Ireland (Billig, 1987).

McDonald explicitly acknowledges and includes Unionists in her vision of a United Ireland. She does this to emphasise that achieving harmony in a “new Ireland” can only emerge through engagement across current intergroup divisions. In particular, she outlines the need for intergroup dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation to achieve a harmonious united future. As such, McDonald proposes that a United Ireland entails bridging intergroup divides, while simultaneously allowing groups to maintain their distinct identities.

In her three-part list outlining the actions “we need to” take to build this future, the use of “we” becomes ambiguous. Though it suggests the importance of a collective effort, the phrase “we need to understand that” specifically refers to those who are not Unionists. Moreover, it remains unclear who specifically should participate in discussions regarding the future and the process of reconciling the past. Therefore, although McDonald seemingly offers guidance on moving forward from division towards a harmonious future, she does not offer clarity regarding the specific people or groups who should be engaged in these crucial conversations.

There is a similar lack of clarity when acknowledging the “hurt” and “pain” endured during the previous conflict in Northern Ireland. McDonald actively refrains from naming specific perpetrators, or emphasising the necessary apologies that should be offered. Rather, she creates a distance between herself and those in “pain” by using the term “people”, which

indicates a distinction from the collective “us”. McDonald’s deliberate omission of those responsible for causing the pain and suffering can be seen as a strategic form of social action (Murray & Durrheim, 2019; 2021). This approach enables her to avoid directly addressing the harm inflicted by a proportion of her own Republican followers, while simultaneously giving the impression of advocating for apologies and reconciliation.

Extract six is taken from Sinn Féin’s Ard Fheis on 5th November 2022. In this extract, McDonald transitions from appealing to her audience as an ingroup when talking about the past, to speaking across intergroup divides when envisioning the future. She invokes a place-based superordinate group to include everyone in her vision for a United Ireland. She harnesses people’s connection to Ireland as a platform to mitigate fears about a United Ireland and provide a sense of belonging and continuity.

Extract 6 (Mary Lou McDonald addresses Sinn Féin’s Ard Fheis 5/11/2022)

A chairde, we live in the end days of partition. On the cusp of an historic opportunity – the reunification of our country and our people. Shaping a future for everyone. Moving forward in belief that there is no them. There is only us. Us who call Ireland home. We can build a nation home for all our people. Some are apprehensive about Irish unity. I want you to know that in a new Ireland you will be cherished, included, respected as equal citizens. This is your place. This is your home.

In this extract, McDonald begins by appealing to her audience on an ingroup basis. She is speaking to those who support her ideological narrative that implies the “end days of partition” and the “reunification of our country” are an inevitable and desirable outcome for Ireland. Her use of the Irish language, “a chairde”, may be considered exclusive, particularly to Unionists, due to its historical associations with Irish Nationalism. Indeed, the

implementation of the Irish language has been contentious in Unionist communities in Northern Ireland (Pritchard, 2004).

McDonald shifts to speaking across intergroup divisions when envisioning the future. She constructs a superordinate group rooted in a shared attachment to place, “us who call Ireland home”, to include everyone in Ireland in her vision for Irish unity. Her emphasis on a collective “us” and rejection of the idea of “them” attempts to unite previously divided groups under this superordinate group and challenge the longstanding “us” versus “them” mentality that has characterised politics in Northern Ireland (Ferguson & McKeown, 2016; Mac Ginty et al., 2007). Her use of pronouns without specifying the specific ingroup and outgroup creates useful ambiguity. It could refer to Unionists and Republicans in Northern Ireland or Irish in Northern Ireland and Irish in the Republic of Ireland. In any case, she is harnessing people’s shared attachment to the island of Ireland to depict a future in which these divided intergroup dynamics are no longer relevant.

McDonald’s language choices reveal her strategic navigation of the delicate landscape of identities in Ireland. By opting for the phrase “nation home” rather than national home when referring to a United Ireland, she actively avoids invoking national identity, which is hotly disputed in Northern Ireland (Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010). Additionally, her use of the inclusive phrase “for all our people” indicates her acknowledgment of the different identities in Ireland without explicitly naming them. Similar to O’Neill’s approach, here, McDonald minimises the marked differences among her various audiences regarding a United Ireland by stating that “some are apprehensive”. However, her assurance that they will be “cherished, included, and respected” directly addresses the concerns of Unionists, who fear their identity will be diminished in a United Ireland (Todd, 2021).

Following this, McDonald transitions to the pronoun “you” to directly engage with people who may not identify with her political stance. This shift enables her to actively include those who are not aligned with her ideology. By stating, "your place” and “your home," McDonald strategically aligns people’s current attachment to Ireland with the vision of a unified Ireland she seeks to create. This alignment serves to reshape people’s relationship to Ireland in a way that promotes her political agenda (Billig, 1987). Furthermore, she harnesses this people-place relationship to instil a sense of continuity and belonging, bridging the transition from the old Ireland to the new Ireland for those who may be apprehensive.

Discussion

The present study explored how political leaders use identities to promote a political agenda for change in a deeply divided context. Our analysis focussed on political speeches delivered by Sinn Féin leaders to audiences in the island of Ireland following Brexit. The Irish Republican party Sinn Féin have capitalised on the political instability of Brexit to push their political goal of a United Ireland which requires the support of divided identity groups in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The first theme highlighted how Sinn Féin leaders portrayed Brexit as a form of political *déjà vu* (Chayinska & McGarty, 2021), symbolising ongoing mistreatment of Ireland by the British government. This narrative was underpinned by their political agenda that a unified Ireland 'us' is crucial to avoid being ruled and governed by the British government. In the second theme, when envisioning a future United Ireland, the leaders shifted towards constructing a new superordinate group rooted in the collective attachment to the island of Ireland. This place-based superordinate group served as a unifying platform, allowing the leaders to acknowledge and embrace the diversity of subgroup identities while advocating for unity. In contrast to the first theme, which focused on historical grievances, in the second theme the leaders aimed to transcend Ireland's history of conflict and pave the way for a harmonious future.

In line with intergroup leadership theory, the leaders constructed a superordinate group that acknowledged and valued subgroup differences while fostering a collaborative, interdependent relationship (Hogg et al., 2012). This approach to bridging intergroup divides contrasts with the CIIM (Gaertner et al., 1993), which emphasises shared commonalities as the basis for a superordinate group. Instead, the analysis indicates that the Sinn Féin leaders recognised the differences between the subgroups- namely Unionists' opposition to United Ireland. Although at times they minimised the deep-seated differences between Unionists and Republicans to reinforce their political position of unity, this recognition of intergroup differences is an important step in reducing identity threat and bridging intergroup divides (Hogg, 2015; Hogg et al., 2012; Kershaw et al., 2021a; Kershaw et al., 2021b; Rast et al., 2018). At the same time, the leaders crafted a positive interdependent relationship by highlighting the place of Ireland as a shared homeland. This concept of place served as the foundation for cooperation, and the basis of the overarching superordinate category. In this construction, the superordinate group, grounded in a shared location, does not require strong identification with either the subgroup or superordinate group, as the Dual Identity Model suggests (Dovidio et al., 2009). Instead, the defining element of the superordinate group was the intergroup relationship itself (Hogg et al., 2012) - how subgroup members coexist and share a homeland while embracing distinct identities.

People's connection to places are psychologically relevant (e.g., Proshansky et al., 1983), allowing these people-place relationships to be strategically constructed for political purposes and action (Abell et al., 2006; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Hopkins & Dixon, 2006). Historically, negative interdependence among ethnoreligious identities in Ireland (Muldoon et al., 2007a) and in other conflict-affected regions (Kelman, 2006), has been underpinned by competing claims to territory. Our analysis highlights how, in a deeply divided context where place attachment serves as a source of conflict, leaders attempt to create a superordinate

group by harnessing people's shared attachment to place. Similar to previous research, the leaders emphasised geographical references to being an island and sharing the same place to create a sense of 'us' without invoking contentious political or national identities (Abell et al., 2006). They strategically utilised the connection people have to Ireland to construct the concept of a United Ireland as 'home'. This strategy aimed to counter Unionists' fears about not belonging in a unified Ireland (Billig, 1987), and the leaders presented a United Ireland as a natural and continuous extension of people's existing sense of place, belonging, and continuity (Bowe, 2012).

However, the potential for leaders to reshape identities- particularly Unionists' place identity rooted in Northern Ireland- remains uncertain. This research, therefore, does not propose rhetoric constructing place identity as a superordinate category as a means for fostering unity or reconciliation in a divided context, recognising that people often hold complex and deeply rooted perspectives on place (Devine-Wright & Lyons, 1997). Instead, it highlights how leaders in a divided context strategically use place identity to delegitimise fears (Billig, 1987) and advance specific political agendas.

The leaders also portrayed a version of history that aligned with their political objective of a United Ireland (Reicher, 2010; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Consistent with previous research, they emphasised Brexit as part of a continuation of historical mistreatment by the British government toward Ireland, framing the Brexit context through a victim-perpetrator lens (Chayinska & McGarty, 2021) to mobilise against Britain (Freel & Bilali, 2022). By highlighting what they depict as historical wrongdoing and linking these to present-day injustices, these leaders are seeking to mobilise support for the collective change they envision (Foran et al., 2024).

Our analysis supports previous research on the advantages of historical discontinuity in contexts with a conflicted past (Obradović & Bowe, 2021; Roth et al., 2017). When the leaders used appeals to history to legitimise a continuity of mistreatment by the British government, their constructions of identity were constrained, reverting to an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dynamic between Britain and Ireland. This historical narrative neglected the political ideology of Unionists who support Northern Ireland's alignment with Britain and the partition of Ireland and failed to acknowledge important intergroup differences necessary for effective leadership (Kershaw et al., 2021a; Kershaw et al., 2021b; Rast et al., 2018). In contrast, Theme 2 showed that focussing on historical discontinuity provided the leaders with an opportunity to envision new identities and intergroup relations (Obradović & Bowe, 2021). The leaders optimised on the altered Brexit context to propose ending Ireland’s divided history and mark a new beginning in a United Ireland. Despite the longstanding and divisive issue of Ireland’s constitutional status, they reconstructed Irish unity as an opportunity to bring people together and create a harmonious future (Billig, 1987). Therefore, in contexts like Ireland, where a history of conflict has profoundly shaped group identities and intergroup relations (Muldoon et al., 2007a; Muldoon et al., 2007b), focussing on historical discontinuity may provide leaders with a narrative for formerly partisan groups to transcend hostile divisions (Obradović & Bowe, 2021). One potential drawback of this strategic narrative is the challenge leaders may face in fulfilling their promise of ending historical conflicts as any plans for a United Ireland unfold.

The process of acknowledging and reconciling past wrongdoings has the potential to pave the way for a desired collective group in the future (Reicher, 2010). In the case of the Sinn Féin leaders, although Mary Lou McDonald acknowledged the need for apologies, the leaders did not offer specific strategies for achieving this, nor did they identify who needs to issue the apologies. While this strategic approach, which avoided addressing the past, served

to prevent implicating Sinn Féin or any Republican followers in the Northern Ireland conflict (see Murray & Durrheim, 2019; 2021). It also reflects the broader context in Ireland, where no comprehensive official inquiry has been conducted to restore truth and justice for those affected by the conflict (Hamber, 2010). Despite efforts such as the Bloody Sunday Inquiry in 1998, the concept of a truth commission, similar to those conducted in other post-conflict societies like South Africa to uncover the ‘truth’ about past wrong doings, faced contention within the Republican and Unionist communities as the peace process unfolded (Lundy & McGovern, 2007). As such, Ireland’s ongoing unresolved past permits the Sinn Féin leaders to offer a political position that does not require deep reflection or a comprehensive resolution of historical conflicts. Rather, they chose to discontinue history, without assuming any responsibility, when discussing their plans for the future (Obradović & Bowe, 2021).

Regarding reflexivity, the first and second authors’ knowledge of Irish history and the second author’s experience of living in Northern Ireland allowed us to contextualise the analysis and adopt a critical perspective. For example, we recognised that the leaders’ use of place identity as a superordinate group was a strategic move and were cautious in interpreting its potential to foster harmonious intergroup relations in Northern Ireland, where territorial and identity disputes are central to the intergroup divide. Therefore, our background and awareness of Irish sociopolitical issues facilitated an in-depth analysis that might be overlooked by those less familiar with the nuances of this context.

In conclusion, our analysis of political speeches from an Irish political party offers novel insight into how leaders can put forward a vision for political transformation in a divided context. We illustrate how leaders can construct a superordinate group among diverse and divided audiences by harnessing a shared attachment to place. A place-based superordinate group may help leaders bridge political, ethnic, and cultural divides. The political upheaval caused by Brexit afforded the leaders with an opportunity to propose a

departure from Ireland's history of division and begin a new chapter for identities and intergroup relations in a unified Ireland. However, focusing on the future without addressing historical grievances may undermine their vision of unity. Therefore, while we have demonstrated how leaders can utilise place-based identities to bridge intergroup divides through their rhetoric, future research should explore the implications of constructing a place-based superordinate group for intergroup relations and leader effectiveness in divided societies.

Insights and Transition to Next Chapter

The current chapter has illustrated how, in the post-Brexit landscape, the Sinn Féin leaders strategically used the period of uncertainty to promote their agenda for Irish (re)unification. Despite initially being opposed to Brexit and presenting it as a threat, the leaders' speeches from 2017 to 2022 articulated a United Ireland as a solution to the Brexit situation. The possibility of Irish (re)unification is enshrined in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, providing a legal and political foundation for such an outcome. As such, the leaders positioned Irish unity as a 'cognitive alternative' to the status quo.

Building on these insights, the next chapter explores perceptions of Brexit threat and opportunity among Nationalists/ Republicans in Northern Ireland. The chapter will investigate how Brexit may be perceived as a threat by this group, while also presenting an opportunity to achieve their goal of a United Ireland, and if this is associated with levels of group identification.

While the current chapter employed a discursive approach to analyse how political leaders use identity to shape society in line with their agenda, the next chapter shifts to more objective measures. This transition is necessary because, after revealing how leaders strategically use identity, the following chapter seeks to investigate how identity- specifically

group identification among Nationalists- is linked to perceptions of threat and opportunity in the Brexit context.

CHAPTER THREE

Brexit: Threat or Opportunity? Nationalist Identification is Related to the Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland.

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Abstract

Northern Ireland has long been a contested territory. The 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement seemed to offer a resolution to the long-standing conflict. However, it has been reawakened by Brexit. Brexit presents a threat in Northern Ireland because it raises the divisive question of the United Kingdom's sovereignty over the region and the issue of the border. However, despite Nationalists' - a political identity group associated with the political ideology of Irish reunification- initial opposition to Brexit, many in this group now view Brexit as a potential opportunity to achieve their political goal of Irish unity. The aim of the present research is to examine the combined influence of the Nationalist's identity and perceived Brexit threat on people's understanding of the proximity of this political goal. We specifically test whether Nationalists' strength of group identification, and the threat of Brexit, is linked to how likely people believe a United Ireland has become. In two studies, we found evidence for the prediction that strong ingroup identification is related to the perception that a United Ireland is more likely. In the second study, path analysis showed that this relationship is mediated by perceived threat. For Nationalists with stronger ingroup identification, the threat of Brexit is greater. Combined, these factors are linked to an increased sense that a United Ireland is likely. In the discussion, we consider the implications of our findings for polarisation in this post-agreement society.

Keywords: Brexit, Northern Ireland, Nationalist, ingroup identification, threat

Public significance statement: This study suggests that, in contexts of political instability, strong group identification and threat may be associated with people's perceptions of political opportunity. Additionally, it highlights the importance of considering the role of identity and threat to understand people's political preferences in a society with pre-existing divisions.

Introduction

Brexit is problematic in Northern Ireland because it accentuates the long-standing division between the political identity groups Unionists and Nationalists (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Traditionally, Nationalists/Republicans- the minority group made up of predominantly Irish Catholics- reject a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and want Northern Ireland to be reunited with the Republic (Elliott, 2000). On the other hand, the majority group made up of Unionists/Loyalists support the same border and Northern Ireland's continued status within the United Kingdom (MacKay, 2000).

Northern Ireland endured 30 years of violent political conflict that largely centred on the issue of the United Kingdom's sovereignty over Northern Ireland. In 1998, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (BGFA) marked the end of the conflict and began what is known as the peace process in Northern Ireland. The BGFA strived to resolve the seemingly incompatible aspirations of an independent United Ireland for Nationalists and continued status within the United Kingdom for Unionists (Muldoon et al., 2007). Significantly, there was the "precarious but essential paradox" (Hayward, 2018, p. 250): Northern Ireland would remain a constitutional part of the United Kingdom if favoured by a majority, otherwise, a border poll will be initiated to vote on unification with the Republic of Ireland.

Membership to the European Union (EU) complemented Northern Ireland's peace process as it provided Unionists and Nationalists with a context that surpassed their ideological, political, and territorial differences (Hayward, 2018; Hayward & Murphy, 2018; Murphy & Evershed, 2021). Critical to this was access to the EU single market, which facilitated the free movement of goods and people across the previously contested Ireland-Northern Ireland border, and as such reduced its salience in everyday life (Hayward, 2018).

Now, Brexit and the associated “border question” fuels the political question regarding Northern Ireland’s constitutional status and as such disrupts the ability of the BGFA to balance Unionists’ and Nationalists’ conflicting political preferences (Çoymak & O’Dwyer, 2020; Doyle & Connolly, 2019; Hayward, 2018; Hayward & Murphy, 2018; Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). With the political future of Northern Ireland at stake, Brexit represents both a potential opportunity and a threat, for these political identity groups (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017, 2021), reproducing a zero-sum context that Northern Ireland had hoped to transcend (Mac Ginty & Du Toit, 2007).

From the outset, Brexit was divisive and mostly patterned along the usual “Unionist versus Nationalist” identity lines (Garry, 2016): The majority of Unionists voted to leave the EU because they saw Brexit as an opportunity to strengthen Northern Ireland’s union with the United Kingdom (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017), whereas most Nationalists voted to remain. At the same time, however, there was intragroup variability within these political groups. Within Unionism, for example, a considerable portion of Unionists (34%) voted to remain in the EU. Indeed, the Ulster Unionist Party- the second largest, and more moderate Unionist political party in Northern Ireland- recommended its supporters to vote remain (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). There was also a smaller number of Eurosceptic Republican dissidents who voted to leave the EU in the belief that it would rally support for a United Ireland and radicalise young Nationalists to “the cause” (Hoey, 2019; Mooney, 2017). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the differences within these groups as well as between these groups, and it speaks to the complexity of identity in Northern Ireland (see Todd, 2010, for an overview).

For the majority of Nationalists, the prospect of Northern Ireland leaving the EU, and the potential return of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, threatened this group (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). Notably, however, despite

Nationalists' initial opposition to Brexit, this group has somewhat translated Brexit into a potential opportunity to achieve their political goal of Irish unity. Leaders of the Sinn Féin political party- the largest Nationalist/Republican party in Northern Ireland who also have representation in the Republic of Ireland- referred to Brexit as "the opportunity of a lifetime" to achieve Irish reunification (Libreri, 2020). Furthermore, recent research among Nationalists in Northern Ireland demonstrates that this group is more expectant of a United Ireland and also more in favour of it because of Brexit (Connolly & Doyle, 2021; Hayward & Rosher, 2020). The aim of the present research is to examine the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland as a consequence of Brexit among Nationalists in Northern Ireland. We specifically test whether Nationalists' strength of ingroup identification and the threat of Brexit are linked to the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. In divided societies like Northern Ireland, where Brexit represents a significant change to the political status quo, changes to group identities can have damaging ramifications for peace (Kelman, 2001). So, while it is critical to understand the rising appetite of Nationalists for a United Ireland, we also discuss whether this has the potential to increase polarisation in this post-agreement society.

Group Identification and Construction of Political Preferences

According to the social identity approach, the identity groups people belong to, such as political and religious groups, provide them with beliefs, values, and norms through which they interact and interpret the world (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). The extent to which these identities shape people's behaviour and cognition is contingent on one's strength of group identification, that is, the strength of the psychological meaning of the group to the self (Turner, 1984). Importantly though, group identification is believed to be dynamic and sensitive to contextual shift (Turner et al., 1994). This means that identity groups, and what they constitute, are not fixed but in a continuous process of construction

shaped by the wider social reality (Hopkins & Reicher, 2011; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). For instance, Todd (2005) provided a comprehensive account of how the introduction of the BGFA- a sociopolitical change- triggered society-wide shifts to the Irish and British identities in Northern Ireland and people's identification with these identities. Often, this identity reconstruction is strategic: it embodies group identity projects and vision of a desired social world (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2009; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Identities can, therefore, have strategic political functions and changes in political context can result in group members seeking and acting to avail of new political opportunities (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010). In the context of Brexit, Nationalists may see the new political context as offering a chance for Irish reunification (Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2021; Hayward & Rosher, 2020). Therefore, not only is it possible that altered political contexts are associated with identity shift, but social change may be made possible by the new understandings of identity (Hopkins et al., 2006).

Recent research demonstrates that Nationalist identification is stronger than it has been since 1998 (Hayward & Rosher, 2020)- the introduction of the BGFA. While group identification within the Irish Nationalist community has been demonstrably higher than other groups in Northern Ireland (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014). Brexit has made identities salient and like other social identities, political identities (e.g., Nationalist) are significant in shaping one's political reality (Cohen, 2003). The extent that people identify with political groups is important as group members with strong identification are more engaged in seeking political ambition and strategic opportunities (for a discussion, see Huddy, 2013). When a political identity group faces a potential loss (e.g., the political future of Northern Ireland following Brexit), those with strong identification are more likely than those with weaker identification to reinforce the preferences of their group and reject information that contradicts their group (Flynn et al., 2017; Gomez et al., 2019; Huddy et al.,

2018). For example, Huddy et al. (2018) demonstrated identification strength is an important predictor of confidence in electoral victory across the United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Given that those with strong political identification are more inclined to support versions of the political reality that are favourable for the ingroup (Huddy et al., 2018), in the present research, Nationalists' strength of identification should be consequential to their political preferences.

Brexit Threat Strengthening Political Preferences

Threat is also important to consider in the formation of political preferences (e.g., Gomez et al., 2019; Van de Vyver et al., 2018). In an analysis of voters in England and Scotland, the perceived threat of immigration was a significant predictor of the leave vote in the Brexit referendum (Abrams & Travaglino, 2018; Van de Vyver et al., 2018). This suggests that political preferences can be driven by a need to establish control over perceived threats (Van de Vyver et al., 2018). Indeed, the political event itself (e.g., Brexit) can be experienced as a threat that may influence political preferences (Gomez et al., 2019). For example, Gomez et al. (2019) demonstrated that in the United States, in response to the threat of losing the 2016 presidential campaign, Hilary Clinton supporters increased their support for the policies of the Clinton campaign. Essentially, in response to threat, group members increased support for their group's political agenda.

In addition, people who have strong group identification may be more likely to experience threat and in turn may be more likely to engage in strategies to defend the group (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; de Hoog, 2013; Riek et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2002). Thus, the experience of threat, and its relation to group identification, is centrally relevant to understand people's political preferences, particularly in divided societies like Northern Ireland (Canetti et al., 2018).

Perceptions of Brexit threat may also be linked to perceptions of political opportunity due to reappraisal of the event. According to social identity/self-categorisation model of stress (Haslam, 2004), stressors in the environment, that is, events that present a potential threat, such as Brexit, can be reappraised into a more positive experience, like an opportunity, if people have the relevant resources to do so. Such resources can include the access to cognitive alternatives, whereby the ingroup that is experiencing the threat is motivated and able to positively reinterpret the event (Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2004, 2005). As mentioned previously, the grounds for a United Ireland are embedded within the BGFA and since the referendum, Nationalist political leaders have used Brexit as a basis for pushing a United Ireland (Evershed & Murphy, 2022). Therefore, the structural and ideological factors now available to Nationalists may facilitate their ability to perceive Brexit as both a threat and an opportunity.

Brexit potentially poses realistic and symbolic threats in Northern Ireland (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Realistic threats involve threats to the political power and resources of the ingroup and also fears over individual physical safety stemming from the outgroup (Stephan et al., 2016). These issues have always been writ large in Northern Ireland (Schmid & Muldoon, 2015). Recent research from the border counties in Northern Ireland demonstrates people perceive Brexit as a realistic threat to cross-community relationships, the peace process, and economic stability of Northern Ireland (Hayward, 2021). Participants also reported that they felt Brexit had hardened people's political views in Northern Ireland (Hayward, 2021). This alludes to Brexit as a symbolic threat, threatening the ingroup's values, beliefs, and ideology (Stephan et al., 2016). For Nationalists, whose political goal is a United Ireland, Brexit is particularly threatening because it represents a further separation from the Republic of Ireland (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017).

Nationalist/Republican political parties in Northern Ireland opposed Brexit.

The acceleration toward a United Ireland within the Sinn Féin party has arisen alongside the need to mitigate the very real economic and political risks of Brexit to Ireland, North and South (Evershed & Murphy, 2022). Indeed, Evershed and Murphy (2022) describe Brexit as a moment of both “unparalleled opportunity and profound threat for Irish Republicanism” (p. 245). Therefore, Nationalists’ increased appetite for a United Ireland (Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2021; Hayward & Rosher, 2020) may be in response to the threat of Brexit. In line with previous research, Nationalists pushing their political agenda may reflect efforts to defend the group and establish control over the threat. Therefore, we suggest that perceiving Brexit as threatening will also be linked to the perception that a United Ireland is more likely among Nationalists.

The Present Study

The present study aims to examine ingroup identification and political preferences among Nationalists in the Brexit context in Northern Ireland. Have Nationalists, who initially opposed Brexit, translated their Brexit threat into a potential opportunity for a United Ireland? Is their strength of group identification associated with this process? In two studies, we test whether Nationalists’ strength of ingroup identification is linked to the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland as a consequence of Brexit. Because of previous evidence showing the significance of threat in shaping political preferences, we consider whether this relationship is mediated by perceived threat. In the first study, we investigate the relationship between Nationalists’ strength of identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. Given the research that demonstrates gradations in identification are important in shaping political preferences, we expect that the stronger Nationalists identify with their ingroup, the more they will perceive that a United Ireland is more likely.

While Study 2a merely tests the predicted correlation between Nationalists' strength of identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland, Study 2b replicates and extends Study 2a as it tests whether this relationship is mediated by perceived Brexit threat. Previous research has shown that threat is experienced most by those with strong ingroup identification. Therefore, we expect that the stronger Nationalists identify with their ingroup, the more they will experience Brexit threat. Altogether, we hypothesised that the link between Nationalists' identification strength and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland will be mediated by their experienced Brexit threat.

The present research was conducted in 2020 during the United Kingdom's transition period of leaving the EU (which ended on December 31, 2020). Like in the rest of the United Kingdom in 2020, in Northern Ireland, there was political uncertainty as the United Kingdom and EU attempted to formulate a trade agreement, and "no deal" remained a possibility (Beesley, 2020). In January 2020, the Nationalist/Republican party Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist party resumed the power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. At the same time, in the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin made significant gains in the election, opening up new opportunities for Sinn Féin to intensify debate on the constitutional question of Northern Ireland (Evershed & Murphy, 2022). The Northern Ireland Protocol and the associated Irish sea border had not yet come into effect in Northern Ireland.

Study 2a

Method

Design

Study 2a uses cross-sectional data from the 2020 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT). We used a correlational design assessing the relationship between

Nationalists' strength of identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland as a consequence of Brexit.

Participants and Procedure

The NILT survey uses a systematic random sample of addresses obtained from the Postcode Address File database of addresses. This provides the most-up-to-date and complete list of addresses in the United Kingdom and is considered a good sampling frame for high quality social surveys. As the NILT survey is an open-access resource, there was no requirement for the authors to obtain ethical approval for analysis purposes.

One eligible member of the household (18 years or older) was randomly selected to take part in the survey using the "next birthday rule". Data were collected through a large-scale computer assisted web interviewing survey. The interviews were conducted between October 8, 2020, and December 8, 2020.

From the total sample of 1,292 respondents, we initially selected participants who self-identified as Nationalist in the present analysis $N = 247$ (19.2%). We excluded five participants who did not indicate their strength of Nationalist identification. A total of 242 participants were included in the analysis. This surpassed the estimated sample size computed by G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) of 108 participants required for an alpha value of .05 and 80% power to detect medium size effects ($\omega^2 = .15$). Their age ranged from 18 to 65 years and older, with 47.8% of respondents aged between 35 and 54 years and 59.5% identified as female. A majority ($n = 188$; 77.5%) described their nationality as Irish, 19.8% as Northern Irish, five as other, one as British, and one as Ulster. In terms of religion, 82% of the sample were Catholic, 15.3% no religion, and 2.7% were Protestant.

Measures

Strength of Identification

Participants indicated their strength of Nationalist identification through selection of either the *very strong Nationalist*, *fairly strong*, or *not very strong* response option. This measure of identification has been included in the NILT survey every year since 2004 (apart from 2007).

Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland as a Consequence of Brexit

Participants answered the question “Do you think that the UK leaving the EU [Brexit] has made a United Ireland more likely, less likely, has it made no difference, or don’t know?” by selecting one of the four response options (Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely, less likely, has made no difference, do not know). We coded the response more likely with 1 and collapsed all the remaining responses (less likely, has made no difference, do not know) to represent the perception that Brexit has not made a United Ireland more likely and coded it with 2. This was done because some of the expected cell counts were below five and did thus not meet assumptions for a χ^2 test (Field, 2017).

Results

From the analysed sample of Nationalists 16.9% identified as *very strong*, 40.9% identified as *fairly strong* and 42.2% identified as *not very strong*. A χ^2 analysis was undertaken to explore the relation between strength of Nationalist identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. Table 1 shows the observed counts, expected counts and adjusted standardised residuals for each response. We set the significant threshold for standardised residuals to the conventional ± 1.96 , $p < .05$, ± 2.58 , $p < .01$. Results showed a significant association between strength of Nationalist identification and perceived likelihood of a United Ireland, $\chi^2 (2, N = 242) = 10.11$, $p = .006$, Cramer’s $V = .20$. Although there was an overall trend for respondents to report that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely. In line with the hypothesis, only Nationalists with *very strong* identification were

significantly more likely than expected by chance to perceive that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely. Those with *very strong* identification were also significantly less likely to perceive that Brexit *has not* made a United Ireland more likely. In contrast, Nationalists with *not very strong* identification were significantly less likely than expected by chance to perceive that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely. Those with *not very strong* identification were also significantly more likely to report that Brexit *has not* made a United Ireland more likely.

Overall, the results provide preliminary evidence for the prediction that the stronger Nationalists' ingroup identification the more Nationalists perceive that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely.

Table 1

Observed Counts, Expected Counts, Observed Frequencies, and Standardised Residuals for Strength of Nationalist Identification (Rows) and the Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland (Columns)

Nationalist Identification		Brexit has made a United	Brexit has not made a United Ireland more
		Ireland more likely	likely
Very strong	Observed Count	39	2
	Expected Count	34.73	6.27
	Observed frequencies	95.12%	4.88%
	Adjusted Standardised		
	Residuals	2.03*	-2.03*
Fairly strong	Observed Count	88	11
	Expected Count	83.86	15.14
	%	88.89%	11.11%
	Adjusted Standardised		
	Residuals	1.50	-1.50
Not very strong	Observed Count	78	24
	Expected Count	86.40	15.60
	%	38.05%	64.86%
	Adjusted Standardised		
	Residuals	-3.04**	3.04**
Total		205 (84.7%)	37 (15.3%)

Note * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$;

Study 2b

Study 2b aims to replicate and extend Study 2a's findings with a second sample of Nationalists in Northern Ireland. The data collected were part of a wider research project exploring Brexit in Northern Ireland. For the present purpose, we aimed to replicate that Nationalists with stronger group identification perceive that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely. In addition, we tested whether stronger identification will be positively associated with greater perceived Brexit threat, which in turn will contribute to explaining why identification is related to the perception that a United Ireland is more likely. The present data set did not include a measure of Nationalist identification strength, but it included identification with Irish. Given the high degree of overlap between identities in Northern Ireland, in which identities are often indicative of other factors such as political views (Muldoon et al., 2007), we believe that for self-identified Nationalists in Northern Ireland identification with Irish provides a suitable proxy for their strength of identification with the political identity- Nationalist.

Method

Design

This study uses a cross-sectional survey design. Parallel to Study 2a, participants that selected Nationalist as their preferred political identity were included in the analysis. We examined the relationship between strength of identification with Irish and perceived Brexit threat on the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland among Nationalist respondents.

Participants and Procedure

A total of 666 individuals consented to participate in the research, of whom 231 self-categorised as Nationalist and/or Republican. After excluding four participants who categorised as both Unionist and Nationalist, two participants below the age of 18, three

participants who did not live in Northern Ireland, and a further seven participants missing responses on key variables of interest, a total sample of 215 participants were included in the analysis. This surpassed the estimated sample size computed by G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) of 68 participants required for an alpha value of .05 and 80% power to detect medium size effects ($f^2 = .15$). Of the analysed sample, participants were aged 18–64 years, $M_{\text{age}} = 33.06$, $SD = 9.95$, and 65.1% of the sample identified as female. A majority of participants ($n = 157$; 73%) described their national identity as Irish and 16.7% as Northern Irish. This closely matches the 77.3% of Nationalists who identified as Irish and 19.8% who identified as Northern Irish in Study 2a. In terms of religion, 80.5% of the sample were Catholic. See Appendix 2 for a full list of reported national and religious identities.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Limerick Faculty of Education and Health Sciences research ethics committee. The time frame of data collection mirrored Study 2a, taking place between October and December 2020. Participants were recruited through the online platform Prolific. The survey- that included several other measures- took approximately 12 min to complete, and participants were paid £1.20 each for their participation. Only people who were residents of Northern Ireland were invited to take part in the online survey hosted using Qualtrics.

Measures

Strength of Identification

As a proxy for strength of Nationalist identification, we used the implemented 10 items from a thoroughly validated measure of social identification (Leach et al., 2008) that assessed identification with Irish (e.g., “I feel committed to Irish people,” 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .80$). A higher score represented greater identification strength.

Perceived Threat of Brexit

For perceived threat of Brexit, we used three adapted items from previous research on threat (de Hoog, 2013; Roth et al., 2017; e.g., “To what extent does Brexit make you feel threatened?”, 1= *not at all*, 7= *to a great extent*, $\alpha = .89$). A higher score indicated greater perceived threat.

Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland as a Consequence of Brexit

Perceived likelihood of a United Ireland as a consequence of Brexit was measured with an adapted version of the NILT item from Study 2a. Participants indicated their agreement with the statement “To what extent does the UK leaving the European Union make a United Ireland more likely?”, 1= *not at all*, 7= *to a great extent*. A higher score indicated greater support for the contention that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely.

Results

Data were exported from Qualtrics to SPSS 28 for analysis. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the measures are reported in Table 2. Replicating the results of Study 2a, the data showed a statistically significant positive association between identification strength and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. There was also a significant positive correlation between perceived Brexit threat and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland along with a positive correlation between identification and perceived threat of Brexit.

Table 2. Means (*M*), Standard Deviations (*SD*), and Correlations Among Variables, Study 2b (*N* = 215).

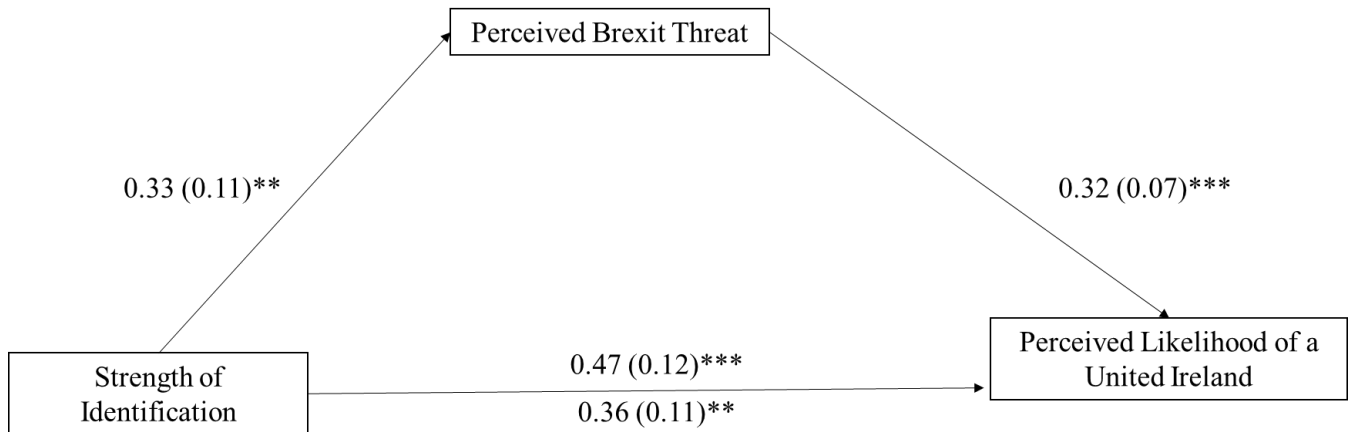
Variables	M	SD	2	3
1. Strength of Identification	5.65	0.91	0.21	0.26
2. Perceived Threat of Brexit	5.62	1.47		0.34
3. Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland as a Consequence of Brexit	4.93	1.61		

Note. ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

A simple mediation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between strength of identification, perceived Brexit threat, and perceptions of the likelihood of a United Ireland. Mediation models allow researchers to specify pathways between variables, specifically by examining how an independent variable (strength of identification) influences a dependent variable (perceived likelihood of a United Ireland) through a mediator (perceived Brexit threat) (Hayes, 2022). This analysis builds on the findings from Study 2a by assessing whether perceived Brexit threat mediates the relationship between strength of identification and perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. In other words, it explores whether perceptions of Brexit threat serve as a mechanism through which identification strength is associated with Irish (re)unification perceptions.

Figure 1

*The Indirect Path of Strength of Identification to the Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland through Perceived Brexit Threat. Unstandardised coefficients with standard errors in the bracket. The total effect is reported above the line, the direct effect below the line. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.*



We used a PROCESS (Hayes, 2022, Model 4, 10,000 bootstrap samples) simple mediation model to test the relations between our variables. The total effect of strength of identification on the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland was significant, $b = 0.47$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(1, 213) = 4.00$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.70]. Stronger identification was associated with greater Brexit threat, $b = 0.33$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(1, 213) = 3.06$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.55], and Brexit threat was positively associated with the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland when strength of identification was controlled for, $b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(2, 212) = 4.58$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.46]. Strength of identification and perceived Brexit threat accounted for 15% of the variance in the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland, $R^2 = 0.15$, $F(2, 212) = 19.22$, $p < .001$. Path analysis showed that the total effect of strength of identification on the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland was significantly reduced when perceived Brexit threat was accounted for but, a significant direct effect remained, $b = 0.36$,

$SE = 0.11$, $t(2, 212) = 3.16$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.59]. The indirect effect was significant, $b = 0.11$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.24]. Thus, in line with the hypothesis, the relation between strength of identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland was partially mediated by perceived Brexit threat (see Figure 1).

In accordance with best practice in assessing cross-sectional mediation models, we tested two theoretically plausible alternative models (Fielder et al., 2018). First, we examined strength of identification as a moderator of the association between perceived Brexit threat and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. This analysis revealed a non-significant interaction effect, $b = -0.04$, $SE = .06$, $p = .497$. Thus, strength of identification did not moderate the association between Brexit threat and perceived likelihood of a United Ireland.

Next, we investigated whether the relationship between Brexit threat and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland is mediated by strength of identification. This indirect was significant, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.007, 0.099]. Therefore, we cannot rule out this alternative mediation model.

Discussion

The present studies investigated group identification among Nationalists in Northern Ireland in relation to the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. In line with our hypothesis, the results demonstrated that stronger identification among Nationalists goes along with the view that Brexit may make a United Ireland more likely. Further, as expected, the path analysis showed that this relationship is partially mediated by the perceived threat of Brexit. It demonstrated that for those Nationalists with stronger group identification, the threat of Brexit is greater, which in turn explained some of the shared variance between identification and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland. Together, the present findings indicate that in this divided society, where Brexit represents a significant sociopolitical change, the

Nationalist group also sees Brexit as presenting possible progress toward their political agenda for a United Ireland. Here, the results demonstrate that the perception that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely is associated with strong group identification and perceived threat.

The present findings provide support for the strategic political function that identities can have (Huddy, 2013; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010). The results demonstrated that in Northern Ireland, highly identified Nationalists who initially opposed Brexit (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017), and substantially voted against it (Garry, 2016), now demonstrate support for the view that Brexit has made their political ambition of a United Ireland more likely (Connolly & Doyle, 2021; Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2021; Hayward & Rosher, 2020). While Irish reunification may represent the basis of the Nationalist identity, these findings indicate the altered political context has given this identity group the means to reconstruct Brexit as a potential opportunity that benefits their identity projects (see Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Indeed, the timing of the research coincides with Sinn Féin's electoral triumph in the Republic of Ireland presenting them with new opportunities to push for a United Ireland (Evershed & Murphy, 2022). Further, the data were sampled during the Brexit transition period and as such prior to the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol and Irish sea border, which reduces the contention that this view of Brexit for Irish unity is fuelled solely by practical incentives. Rather, it suggests that this shared political outlook has emerged among Nationalists to potentially avail of new political opportunities (see Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

These findings, along with the fact the majority of Nationalists voted against Brexit (Garry, 2016; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017), may indicate that the shift in Nationalists' political preferences for Brexit from opposition to possible opportunity (Connolly & Doyle, 2021; Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2021; Hayward & Rosher,

2020) may be associated with identity and threat. Similar to previous evidence, the results indicated that there was strong identification with the Nationalist identity in the current Brexit context (Hayward & Rosher, 2020), and in support of previous research, those with stronger identification demonstrated greater support for the contention that Brexit has made a United Ireland more likely. Thus, in this Brexit context, greater identification strength may be associated with seeking strategic opportunities (Huddy, 2013) and supporting a political reality that favours the ingroup (Flynn et al., 2017; Gomez et al., 2019; Huddy et al., 2018). In accordance with previous literature, those with stronger identification were also more likely to feel threatened (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; de Hoog, 2013; Riek et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2002), and this Brexit threat may influence strong identifiers to perceive a United Ireland as more likely. Therefore, we argue, our findings extend current research by demonstrating the relevance of identity and threat to political preferences in a new context. Our findings imply that even in Northern Ireland, where there is political intransigence (Mac Ginty et al., 2007), political preferences are associated, at least in part, by identity and threat concerns, which are equally shaped by the wider shifting sociopolitical context.

In terms of practical implications, the present findings support previous work demonstrating that Brexit is presenting a threat in Northern Ireland (the high mean score of perceived Brexit threat in Study 2b) and this threat could be driving polarisation (Hayward, 2021; Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Recent research in Northern Ireland demonstrates a fall in the middle ground- with fewer people identifying as “neither Unionist nor Nationalist” and an increase in people identifying with the political positions of Unionists and Nationalists (Hayward & Rosher, 2020). Our findings suggest that highly identified Nationalists are particularly threatened by Brexit, therefore they may have become more concerned with pushing their own political agenda for a United Ireland. Indeed, this momentum for Brexit to deliver a United Ireland among Nationalists is likely to threaten Unionists and this will likely

harden their political views also. Therefore, while Northern Ireland's politics have a long history of being polarised (Todd, 2010), Brexit delivers another frontier to further polarise the political positions of Unionists and Nationalists. As such, we would expect that reducing Brexit threat is necessary to curb the risk of further polarisation and erosion of intergroup harmony that has progressed across these communities since the BGFA (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014).

Limitations and Future Research

While the present research provides an important snapshot of current political preferences for Brexit in Northern Ireland from two different Nationalist samples, we cannot infer causality due to the cross-sectional nature of the design. Furthermore, an alternative model, where the relationship between perceived Brexit threat and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland is mediated by strength of identification, is also plausible. This means that while we demonstrated a relationship between Nationalist ingroup identification, Brexit threat, and the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland, we cannot distinguish between the two models. Rather, our model built upon previous social identity theorising along with empirical evidence that demonstrated the positive effect of identification strength on supporting preferential information about the ingroup (Flynn et al., 2017; Gomez et al., 2019; Huddy et al., 2018), and threat as an underlying variable of this relationship (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). In this applied context, it is likely that there are reciprocal relations, and we think that it is important to acknowledge. As such, when strength of identification is high so is threat, and when threat is high, we are likely to see more group identification (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmid & Muldoon, 2015). Future research using experimental methods should address the causal relations between these variables.

Another limitation of the current research is that Study 2b examines Nationalists' strength of identification with the Irish identity rather than directly measuring identification with the Nationalist political identity. As such, the variable is not necessarily representative of Nationalists' strength of political identification but mostly represents Nationalists' national identification. However, we note that there is a high degree of overlap between identities in Northern Ireland, and national identification can be indicative of other factors such as political views (Muldoon et al., 2007). Additionally, even though Study 2b included Nationalists' identification with Irish rather than identification with Nationalist, the relationships observed were in the expected direction, that is, stronger identification is linked to experiencing more threat and the perception that a United Ireland is more likely.

In addition, it is also important to acknowledge that a sizeable proportion of Nationalist participants in this research (18% in Study 2a and 19.5% in Study 2b) is not drawn from the traditional "Irish Catholic" community. The diversity within our sample reflects the nuances of a real-life sample and demonstrates that identities in Northern Ireland are not monolithic but complex (e.g., Coakley, 2007; Todd, 2010). Thus, the results do not seek to represent the political preferences of the Nationalist community in its entirety. Rather we offer insight into potential mechanisms influencing perceptions of a United Ireland while recognising the diversity of the sample.

Although our research adds an important contribution to the psychological literature exploring the timely topic of Brexit and identity in Northern Ireland, it fails to address the experiences of those from the Unionist community who have equally faced significant sociopolitical upheaval. However, examination of the Unionist population was beyond the aims and scope of this research that was specifically interested in the increased momentum for a United Ireland in Northern Ireland among Nationalists. Future research

should endeavour to explore the political preferences of Unionists to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Brexit context in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

Brexit has reproduced a “Unionist versus Nationalist” political dynamic in Northern Ireland. The present research has shown that many Nationalists, particularly those with strong ingroup identification, are now focused on how Brexit can benefit their group by delivering a United Ireland. Our findings suggest that this hardening of Nationalists’ political preferences for a United Ireland may partially be explained by threat. In line with social identity theorising, we propose that examining group identities and threat is important to understand how political contexts are shaped. In particular, attending to identity and threat in a society with preexisting conflict allows us to better understand why events like Brexit can be divisive and damaging.

Insights and Transition to Next Chapter

This chapter has demonstrated that among Nationalists and Republicans in Northern Ireland, strong group identification was associated with perceiving greater Brexit threat, which in turn, was associated with viewing Brexit as an opportunity for achieving a United Ireland. These findings suggest that the narrative promoted by the leaders of Sinn Féin (as outlined in Chapter Two) have influenced how Nationalists/Republicans perceive Brexit—namely, as both a threat and an opportunity.

While the current chapter helps contextualises the findings from Study 1 (Chapter Two) among a sample of Nationalists/Republicans in Northern Ireland, it became apparent that to provide a comprehensive thesis on the topic of Brexit and a United Ireland, it was essential to also examine these issues in the Republic of Ireland. This is because any future referendum on Irish reunification would require majority support in both Northern Ireland

and the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, the next chapter will focus on exploring the impact of Brexit on attitudes toward a United Ireland in the Republic of Ireland.

While it might seem logical to continue testing the mediation model from the current chapter in the next chapter for a smoother thesis flow, the shift in context required a shift in the order and focus of variables. In the final study, presented in Chapter Four, I employ an experimental design to examine how Brexit threat affects support for a United Ireland among Irish people in the Republic of Ireland. This study tests how presenting information about the economic threats posed by Brexit influences levels of support for Irish (re)unification. The decision to focus on threat as the predictor variable, rather than identity as in the previous chapter, was informed by the distinct context of the Republic of Ireland. In this context, concerns surrounding Brexit have primarily centred on economic uncertainty, with identity playing a less prominent role than in Northern Ireland. Indeed, in the next chapter, identification is examined as an outcome variable of perceived threat. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the relationship between threat and identity is likely to be reciprocal and in the Republic of Ireland, I examine the potential for economic threat to drive national identification.

Additionally, in the next chapter, attitudes towards a United Ireland are examined in terms of levels of support, rather than viewing it as an opportunity. This distinction is important because the concept of opportunity is relevant primarily to those who already support Irish unity, which aligns with the political ideology of Nationalists and Republicans explored in the current study. In contrast, the next study focuses on a broader sample of Irish people, where support for Irish unity is not assumed. Instead, political ideology is controlled for, allowing for a direct examination of how Brexit threat impacts attitudes toward a United Ireland among Irish people in the Republic of Ireland. Finally, an experimental approach was

chosen to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between Brexit threat and attitudes toward Irish unity in this context.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Impact of Threatening Information About Brexit on Political Preferences, National Identity, and National Group Boundaries: An Experiment in Ireland

Abstract

Recent research indicates the need to understand how threats operate at a local level. In the wake of Brexit's significant impact on Ireland's political, economic, and social climate, the present research investigated whether information about economic threat posed by this political event affect political preferences in the Republic of Ireland, as well as national identity and boundaries of the national group ($N = 267$). We experimentally manipulated perceived economic threat posed by Brexit using fictitious information and assessed political preferences for a 'United Ireland'. Additionally, we examined the impact of this economic threat for strength of national identification, as well as the boundaries of the national community, measured by civic and ethnic nationalism. We also assessed participants' agreement with the manipulated information about Brexit as a moderator of these effects. Results indicated that threatening information about Brexit goes along with more support for Irish unity the more participants' agree with the information and reduces support the more participants' disagree. There was no effect of threat on national identification or civic and ethnic nationalism. The discussion highlights the implications for constructing threats in political messaging and offers important insights into preferences for Irish unity within the evolving Brexit context.

Key words: threat; politics; national identity; civic nationalism; ethnic nationalism

Introduction

Brexit marked a significant political change for the island of Ireland, triggering economic concerns and discussions regarding the potential (re)unification of the Republic of Ireland (i.e., Ireland in the south of the island which remained part of the European Union) and Northern Ireland (part of the United Kingdom; Murphy, 2019). During periods of economic uncertainty, such as the upheaval of Brexit, people's political preferences can shift to regain a sense of control in what they perceive as an uncertain situation (Jetten et al., 2021). In such contexts, national identification tends to strengthen (Shayo, 2009, 2020) and it can reduce willingness to include 'others' in the national group (Jay et al., 2019). Recent research, however, indicates that changes in political preferences in response to threat vary, based on the type of threat and the national context (Brandt et al., 2021; Eadeh & Chang, 2020) leading to calls to examine specific threats more locally (Brandt et al., 2021). Hence, in the present study, we aimed to examine how the specific economic threat stemming from Brexit affects political preferences in the Republic of Ireland. Using an experimental design, we aimed to investigate whether Brexit's economic threat affects preferences for a 'United Ireland'. Additionally, we examined how this Brexit economic threat may affect people's strength of national identification and perceptions regarding who should be included within the national community.

Economic Threat and a United Ireland

A United Ireland, involving the (re)unification of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, would entail a major sociopolitical transformation, potentially merging two distinct territories and populations into one nation (see Garry et al., 2020 for possible models of a United Ireland). Current legislation stipulates that a United Ireland can only be reached through the consent of the majority in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, determined

by concurrent referendums held in both regions (Renwick & Kelly, 2021). Brexit was a pivotal moment in shaping the island of Ireland's constitutional future (Todd, 2017), particularly as Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom, is no longer included in the European Union (EU) like the Republic of Ireland. These changed circumstances and uncertainties have ignited discussions about holding a referendum of Irish (re)unification (Connolly & Doyle, 2019). Research indicates growing support for a United Ireland in the Republic of Ireland (Garry et al., 2022; Loscher, 2023), and increasing support in Northern Ireland following Brexit (Hayward et al., 2022).

To understand the growing appeal of a particular political belief, policy, or ideology, like a United Ireland, often involves examining the context of the political view and the type of threat that precedes it. Threats tend to enhance the appeal of political policies that are perceived to effectively address or rectify the threat (Eadeh & Chang, 2020). This means that specific threats have specific outcomes. The perceived threat of the Covid-19 pandemic has been associated with increased authoritarianism to restore societal order (Maher et al., 2023). On the other hand, threats to healthcare-access, can increase political liberalism (Eadeh & Chang 2020). In Northern Ireland, perceptions of Brexit threat have been linked to heightened preferences for a United Ireland, suggesting that, for some groups in this context, a United Ireland may be seen as a solution to address the threat of Brexit (Shelly et al., 2023). However, what constitutes the 'best' political policy to address a particular threat also varies across national contexts, influenced by cultural and historical factors (Brandt et al., 2021; Maher et al., 2023). Therefore, we extend current literature by examining the threat posed by Brexit in a new context, and by focussing on the specific economic threat it presents. Here we examine the effect of Brexit's economic threat on shaping preferences for a United Ireland in the Republic of Ireland.

Economic Threat, National Identity and Boundaries of the National Group

In contexts of threat, turning to a large social category such as the nation can provide a source of solace and solidarity (e.g., Reicher et al., 2010). In line with that argument, research suggests that economic threat can strengthen people's identification with groups (Jay et al., 2019; Shayo, 2020). In particular, during economically uncertain times, national identities tend to strengthen (Shayo, 2009; 2020) to restore a sense of security (Jay et al., 2019; Kinnvall, 2004). In the current study, we apply this theorising to the local context of Ireland facing Brexit and test whether the economic threat associated with Brexit affects the strength of Irish identification in the Republic of Ireland.

Economic threat may also result in resistance against including outsiders within the national group (e.g., Jetten et al., 2015; Solt, 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that when people perceive economic inequality as increasing, which may pose an economic threat to people in a nation, they become more opposed to 'newcomers' joining their society, compared to when economic inequality is declining (Jetten et al., 2015). Politicians often capitalise on this phenomenon, using economic threats to gain support for anti-immigration policies (Portice & Reicher, 2018). For instance, Brexit which was marketed as 'taking back control' of the United Kingdom (UK) and its borders, was partly driven by perceived economic threat (Macdougall et al., 2020; Van de Vyer et al, 2018). In the present study, we explore how the nation's boundaries are constructed (who belongs) and the contents of the identity (what it means to belong) (Hopkins, 2001), in response to economic threat posed by Brexit in the Republic of Ireland.

The construction of a nation's boundaries is reflected in the concepts of civic and ethnic nationalism (Reeskens & Wright, 2011). Ethnic nationalism emphasises people's ancestry, ethnicity, and deeply socialised cultural traits like religious beliefs, as important for national

identity. Civic nationalism centres on voluntary dispositions such as community and political values as important for national identity (Reeskens & Wright, 2011; Shulman, 2002). These two aspects of nationalism are often treated as opposing with civic nationalism being considered as inclusive and ethnic nationalism exclusive (Reeskens & Wright, 2011). However, civic notions of nationhood can also create barriers to social inclusion (Devos et al., 2020; Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2020). For instance, within some contexts, the emphasis on participation in the community and politics to be part of the national group within civic nationalism can exclude immigrants and ethnoreligious minority groups (Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2020). Indeed, subscribing to civic notions of nationhood can enable people to express their ethnonationalism in civic terms (Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2020). In the context of the Republic of Ireland, civic nationalism encompasses an interest in Irish culture, Irish traditional music, sporting activities like the Gaelic Athletic Association, and an appreciation of Irish history. Thus, an endorsement of civic nationalism requires an enactment of prototypical Irish characteristics. As such, civic like ethnic nationalism can create a boundary between ‘us’ who belong and ‘them’ outsiders (Reeskens & Wright, 2011). Therefore, we suggest that in the present context both civic and ethnic nationalism as creating more exclusive group boundaries. We examined whether the economic threat posed by Brexit alters civic and ethnic nationalism in the Republic of Ireland.

Political Allegiance and Preferences for a United Ireland

Previous research has highlighted the significance of political party allegiance to political beliefs (e.g., Brandt et al., 2019; Huddy et al., 2015). In the Republic of Ireland, political parties differ in their stance on the issue of a United Ireland. Some parties have a strong pro-United Ireland agenda, the most prominent being Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin actively advocates for the Irish (re)unification, and it is a central part of their political agenda. On the other hand, other prominent political parties, such as Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, may support the idea of a United

Ireland in principle but do not prioritise it as part of their immediate political agenda. While they may acknowledge the long-term goal of a United Ireland, it is not a central or pressing issue for them in their political strategies and policies. Recent polls indicate that Sinn Féin voters have the highest number of supporters in favour of a United Ireland, while Fine Gael supporters demonstrate the least support (Loscher, 2023). As such, voting preferences shape attitudes toward a United Ireland in both Northern Ireland (Shelly et al., 2023) and the Republic of Ireland (Loscher, 2023). Thus, to assess the effect of economic threat posed by Brexit on relevant outcomes, particularly the preference for a United Ireland, political affiliations need to be controlled for as they may explain a substantial part of the variance. This will allow us to examine the role of political allegiance alongside our primary focus on the impact of economic threat posed by Brexit on the outcome variables.

Present Study

For many people on the island of Ireland, Brexit is perceived as a threat (Hayward, 2021; Shelly et al., 2023). In particular, Brexit raised significant concerns regarding the economic stability and prosperity of businesses and people across the island (Hayward, 2021). This concern was due to the loss of joint access to the EU single market by Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which previously facilitated the free movement of goods, services, and people across the border between these two regions, presenting significant political and economic challenges (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Forecasts predicted that Brexit would have a negative impact on the Republic of Ireland's economy (Copenhagen Economics, 2018, 2020). Furthermore, the current trading arrangements in place to provide solutions to Brexit are regarded as 'precarious' (Hayward & Komarova, 2022). Therefore, the current study focusses specifically on economic threat posed by Brexit as a key concern in the Republic of Ireland.

Brexit has had a profound impact on Irish society and politics (Todd, 2017), and received extensive media coverage (Reuters Institute, 2018). As such, people in the Republic of Ireland may have formed their own beliefs about how Brexit will affect the economy. People's preexisting beliefs can challenge respective manipulations in an experimental study. People's preexisting beliefs towards a topic affect how those people react to information received about the same topic (Eagly & Chaiken, 1995). For example, people generate positive thoughts and validate those thoughts in response to information (Greenwald, 1968; Briñol & Petty, 2022) that aligns with their existing beliefs thus, information they agree with. However, if novel information deviates from existing beliefs people may generate negative thoughts about the information consolidating their existing beliefs. Therefore, manipulating perceived economic threat of Brexit by presenting information on its economic impact may depend on people's agreement with the information presented about how Brexit affects the economy in the Republic of Ireland. In line with this, we included participants' agreement with the manipulated information provided as a potential moderator of any effects of our manipulation of economic Brexit threat on support for a United Ireland, national identification, civic and ethnic nationalism (e.g., Roth et al., 2024). We expected that the manipulation works for those who agree with the manipulated information whereas the opposite would result for those who disagree with the information.

Taken together, this study aims to provide important insights into how the economic threat of Brexit may impact support for local political policies, national identity, and national group boundaries. Specifically, we investigated whether the economic threat of Brexit affects support for a United Ireland, strength of Irish identification, and the boundaries of the Irish national identity group as measured by civic and ethnic nationalism. By doing so, we aim to contribute valuable understandings of how specific threats operate in specific contexts (Brandt et al., 2021).

We hypothesised that, even after controlling for political allegiance, Brexit economic threat (high vs. low) will affect the support for a United Ireland (H1). In line with previous research highlighting that economic threat can alter patterns of national identification, and group boundaries, we also hypothesised that Brexit economic threat will affect national identification (H2), civic nationalism (H3), and ethnic nationalism (H4). We expected that participants' preexisting beliefs about Brexit, as measured by their level of agreement with the information presented during the experimental manipulation, would moderate these effects. We preregistered these main hypotheses except for the agreement with the manipulated information moderation (https://aspredicted.org/TTS_7YY), any deviations from our preregistration plan have been documented in a Preregistration Deviation Table in the Appendix 3 (Willroth & Atherton, 2024).

Method

Participants

We recruited 280 Irish nationals who were residing in the Republic of Ireland from the online crowdsourcing platform *Profilic*TM. Data collection took place from the 12th to 16th February 2024 and the experiment was hosted by Qualtrics. After excluding 11 participants that failed the attention check, one participant missing responses on key variables of interest, and one multivariate outlier, the analysed sample consisted of 267 participants (67.0% women, 31.8% men, 1 other, 2 prefer not to say, $M_{\text{age}} = 38.10$, $SD = 11.14$, range 18 to 76 years of age). This surpassed the estimated sample size computed by G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) of 263 participants required for an alpha value of .05 and 80% power to detect medium size effects ($f^2 = .15$).

Regarding participants' political allegiance, Sinn Féin was the most popular political party (27.3%), followed by Fine Gael (18.4%), and the Independents (16.9%). For a complete

overview of participants' political allegiances see Appendix 3. Participants were compensated with £1.05 for their participation, and the average completion time was five minutes.

Design

The experiment used a between-subjects design aiming to manipulate perceptions of economic threat related to Brexit using fictitious information. Participants were randomly assigned to either the high threat condition ($n = 133$) or the low threat condition ($n = 134$). We assessed the effect of the economic threat condition on participants' support for a United Ireland, strength of Irish identification, civic nationalism, and ethnic nationalism. We accounted for participants' agreement with the information presented in the manipulation as a moderating variable as we expected the manipulation to work better for those who agreed more with the information presented in the respective threat condition and could even have an opposite effect for those who disagreed. Participants' political allegiance served as a covariate, distinguishing participants supporting political parties with a strong pro-United Ireland political agenda ($n = 74$) from those without a strong United Ireland political agenda ($n = 193$). For more information regarding the selection of moderator and covariate variables see Appendix 3.

Brexit Economic Threat Manipulation

In line with previous research manipulating economic threat, participants were presented with a fictitious newspaper article (Dupuis & Newby-Clark, 2016; Wohl et al., 2014). To increase the credibility of the article, participants were informed that it recently appeared in an established Irish newspaper (The Irish Times), and the content was formatted to closely resemble the newspaper's appearance. The respective article provided information about the economic impact of Brexit on the Republic of Ireland and included an image of a

graph depicting Brexit's effect on Euro growth since the 2016 referendum that initiated Brexit. The two experimental conditions were carefully matched in terms of length and phrasing. Participants were notified that they would be asked questions about the article content after reading.

In the high economic threat condition (coded with 1), participants read an article titled "*The Damaging Economic Impact of Brexit*". This article outlined how Brexit had negatively affected the Republic of Ireland's economy, stating that Brexit was a significant contributor to "*the Republic of Ireland's most significant energy price surge in decades, escalating fuel costs and food prices*". The accompanying graph illustrated a decline in Euro growth due to Brexit since 2016.

Conversely, in the low economic threat condition (coded with 0), participants read an article titled "*The Economic Impact of Brexit?*". This article portrayed Brexit as "*not a significant threat to the Republic of Ireland's economy and cost-of-living*". The article was accompanied by a graph illustrating that Brexit has had a predominantly stable impact on the Euro since 2016 (for more detail see Appendix 3).

Measures

Political Allegiance

We assessed participants' political allegiance with one item, "If the general election was tomorrow which party or independent candidate, do you think you would give your first preference vote to?" Participants selected their preferred political party from a list, and if their party was not listed, they could provide an open response. Responses to this item were converted into a dichotomous variable to represent political parties with a strong pro-United Ireland agenda (Sinn Fein, Aontú) or political parties without a strong pro-United Ireland agenda (eight parties listed in Appendix 3). This variable served as a covariate.

Manipulation Check Perceived Economic Brexit Threat

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceive Brexit as an economic threat to the Republic of Ireland. The scale included three items adapted from previous research examining perceptions of Brexit threat (Shelly et al., 2023; e.g., “To what extent does Brexit present an economic threat to the Republic of Ireland”, 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*, $\alpha = .72$). The higher the score the more participants perceived Brexit as an economic threat.

Agreement with Information Presented in the Manipulation

We assessed participants’ agreement with the information presented in the respective experimental condition using a single item, “How much do you disagree or agree with what Prof. O’Connor stated about Brexit in the newspaper article you read at the beginning of this survey?” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated stronger agreement with the manipulated information. This served as a moderator variable.

Support for a United Ireland

Two items measured support for a United Ireland (Garry et al., 2022). Participants indicated their level of support for 1) “Northern Ireland to stay in the United Kingdom” and 2) “Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom and reunify with the Republic of Ireland”, 1 = *strongly opposed*, 7 = *strongly in favour*. Following Garry et al. (2022) we subtracted scores for the first item from the second item, generating our support for a United Ireland score, ranging from -6 to 6. Negative scores indicated a preference for Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom (UK), and positive scores indicated a preference for a United Ireland.

National Identification

Strength of identification with the Irish nationality was measured with a Four-Item measure of Social Identification (FISI; Postmes et al., 2013) (e.g., “I feel committed to Irish people”, 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .90$). A higher score represented stronger identification with the Irish nationality.

Civic and Ethnic Nationalism

To assess ethnic and civic conceptions of Irish identity, we utilised a scale developed by Minescu (n.d.). In line with the well-established International Social Survey Programme (ISSP, 2015), and the European Values Survey (EVS, 2017), which measure both ethnic and civic nationalism, the scale asked participants to rate the importance of various attributes to determine one’s status as “truly Irish” (1 = *not important at all*, 7 = *very important*). This scale included 13 items that represent civic (e.g., “To be community minded- interested in political issues and voluntary work”) and ethnic conceptions of nationalism (“To have been born in Ireland”). An exploratory factor analysis supported a two-factor model with seven items for civic nationalism ($\alpha = .82$) and five items for ethnic nationalism ($\alpha = .80$, for more details see Appendix 3). Higher scores indicated stronger endorsement of each type of nationalism, and each type was examined independently.

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted from the institutional research ethics committee (2020_10_06_EHS). The recruitment announcement on Prolific specifically targeted people living in the Republic of Ireland with Irish nationality. The advert invited them to participate in a survey exploring perspectives on current issues in the Republic of Ireland. Participants read an information sheet before they provided informed consent. Following the experimental manipulation, participants proceeded to indicate their level of support for a United Ireland and support for Northern Ireland to stay in the UK, their perception of Brexit as an economic

threat (manipulation check), followed by one attention check item (“It is important to read questions carefully, please select strongly agree”). Then we assessed identification with the Irish nationality, civic nationalism, and ethnic nationalism. Finally, participants were asked their demographics including political allegiance, and the extent they agreed with the information presented in the experimental manipulation. Upon completion of the survey, participants were fully debriefed on the study’s purpose and procedures, thanked, and compensated.

Data Analysis

The data were exported from Qualtrics to SPSS version 28 for analysis. Preliminary analyses involved examining descriptive statistics, outliers, and correlations. All statistical tests were carried out two-sided with $\alpha < .05$. We used PROCESS (Hayes, 2022, model 1) to test for moderation of agreement with the information presented in the manipulation (values mean centred).

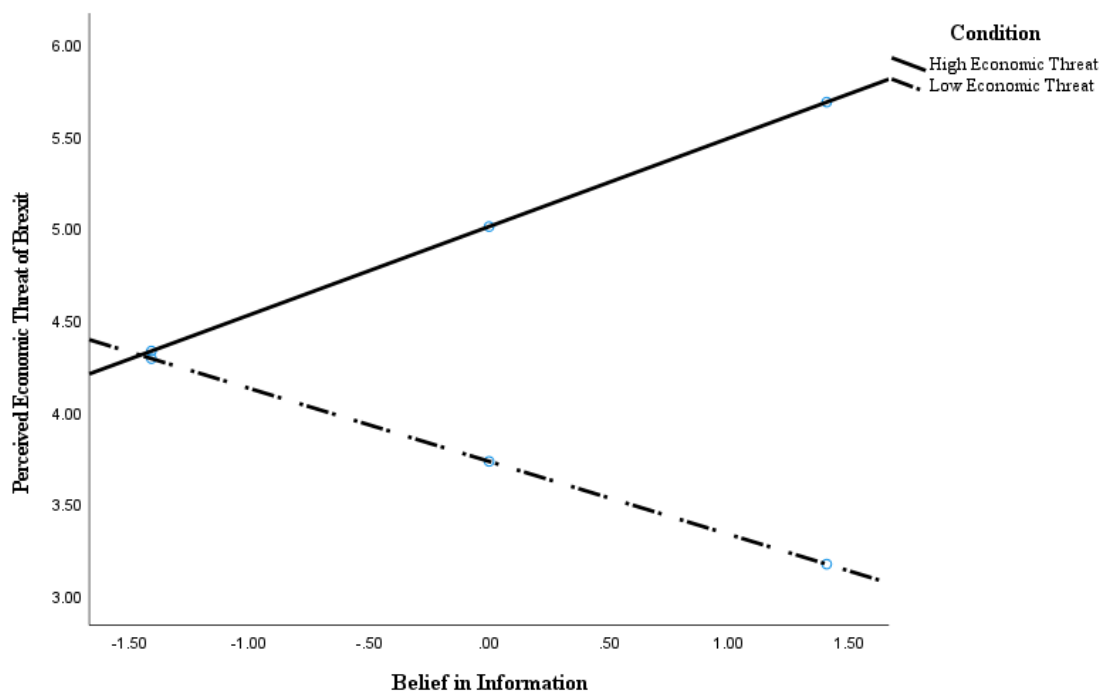
Results

Manipulation Check

We tested whether the economic threat conditions (low threat = 0, high threat = 1) affected participants’ perceptions of Brexit threat, depending on their agreement with the information presented in the manipulation and controlling for participants’ political allegiance (Not strong pro United Ireland party = 0, Strong pro United Ireland party = 1). As illustrated in Figure 1, the analysis showed a significant interaction of the conditions with participants’ agreement with the manipulated information, $b = 0.88$, $SE = .07$, $t(262) = 11.79$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.73, 1.02] on perceived threat. As expected, the more participants agreed with the information (+1 *SD*), the more effective the threat manipulation was, with higher perceived threat in the high threat condition than in the low threat condition, $b = 2.52$, SE

= .14, $t(262) = 17.57$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [2.23, 2.80]. Conversely, the more participants disagreed with the information (-1 *SD*), the manipulation did not significantly affect participant's perceived threat, $b = 0.05$, $SE = .15$, $t(262) = 0.32$, $p = .747$, 95% CI [-0.25, 0.34]. However, the Johnson-Neyman regions of significance showed for disagreement scores of -2.04 and lower a significant negative effect on perceived economic threat ($b = -0.51$, $SE = .19$, $t(262) = -2.71$, $p = .007$, 95% CI [-0.87, -0.14], value of the moderator at -2.04) indicating that as participants' disagreement strengthened, the effect of the economic threat conditions on perceived threat reversed with higher perceived threat in the low threat condition and lower perceived threat in the high threat condition.

Figure 1 *The Effect of Brexit High vs Low Economic Threat on Perceived Brexit Economic Threat by Agreement with the Manipulated Information (values mean centred) and Controlling for Political Allegiance*



Brexit Threat and a United Ireland

Descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 1 and bivariate correlations in Table 2.

Moderation analysis, with political affiliation as a covariate, showed a significant interaction between the economic threat conditions and participants' agreement with the manipulated information on levels of support for a United Ireland, $b = 0.63$, $SE = .31$, $t(262) = 2.07$, $p = .040$, 95% CI [0.03, 1.23].

Specifically, results showed that there were differences in levels of support for a United Ireland between the high and low economic threat condition when participants disagreed with the information ($-1 SD$), $b = -1.30$, $SE = 0.61$, $t(262) = -2.12$, $p = .035$, 95% CI [-2.51, -0.09]. As illustrated in Figure 2, participants who disagreed with the information in the low economic threat condition showed higher levels of support for a United Ireland, compared to those in the high economic threat condition who disagreed with the information. There were no significant differences between conditions when participants agreed with the information ($+1 SD$) $b = 0.48$, $SE = 0.59$, $t(262) = 0.81$, $p = .417$, 95% CI [-0.68, 1.64].

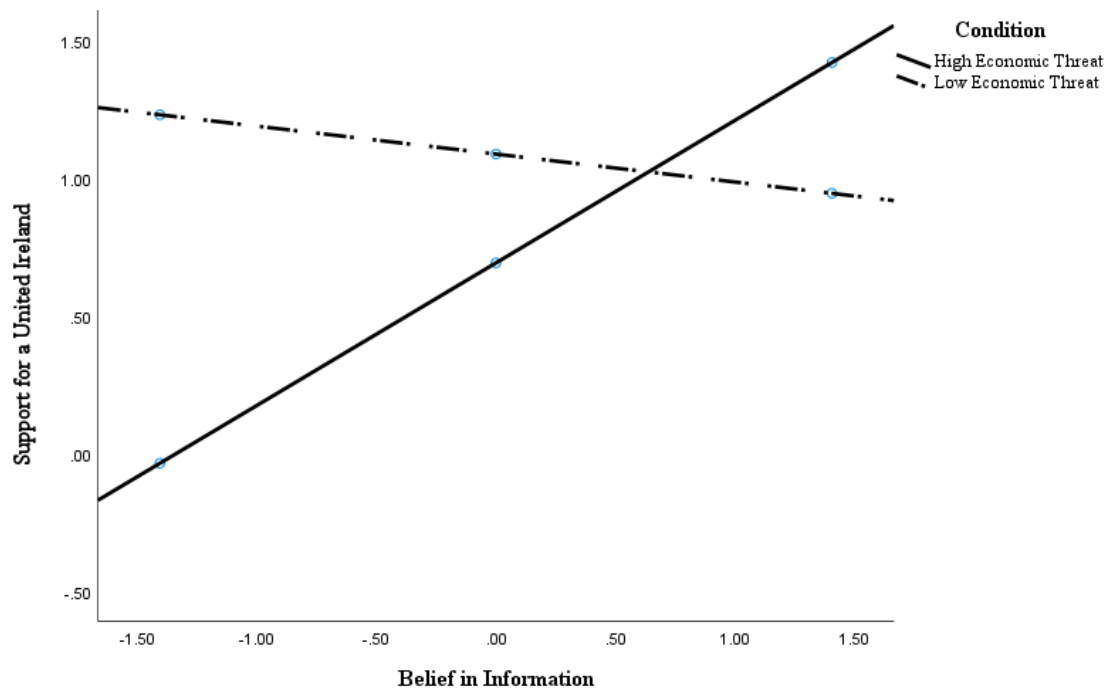
To further probe the interaction effect, we looked at agreement with information as the predictor and the experimental condition as the moderator (Finsaas & Goldstein, 2021). The results showed that within the high economic threat condition, the more participants agreed with the manipulated information the more their support for a United Ireland increased, $b = 0.53$, $SE = .24$, $t(262) = 2.23$, $p = .026$, 95% CI [0.06, 1.00]. As illustrated in Figure 2, participants who agreed that Brexit poses an economic threat to Ireland (represented at the level of the mean and $+ 1 SD$) displayed a stronger preference for a United Ireland compared to those who disagreed that Brexit poses a threat ($-1 SD$). In the low economic threat condition, there was no significant relationship between agreement with the

manipulated information and support for a United Ireland, $b = -0.10$, $SE = .19$, $t(262) = -0.52$, $p = .605$, 95% CI [-0.48, 0.28].

Unsurprisingly, political allegiance correlated with support for a United Ireland, $b = 1.00$, $SE = .46$, $t(262) = 2.17$, $p = .031$, 95% CI [0.09, 1.91]. Specifically, participants supporting political parties advocating for a United Ireland agenda displayed greater support for a United Ireland ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 3.66$) compared to those in support of political parties without a pro-United Ireland agenda ($M = 0.68$, $SD = 3.27$).

Thus, even after accounting for participants' political allegiance, high economic threat information about Brexit that people agreed with went along with more support for a United Ireland than high threat information that people disagreed with. While levels of support for a United Ireland varied between the economic threat conditions, this variation occurred when participants disagreed with the manipulated information, providing partial support for H1.

Figure 2. *The Effect of Brexit High vs Low Economic Threat on Support for a United Ireland Moderated by Agreement with the Manipulated Information (values mean centred) and Controlling for Political Allegiance. Support for a United Ireland is scored on a -6 to 6 scale. Positive values represent support for Irish reunification, negative values represent support for Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom.*



Brexit Threat and Irish Identification

We computed the same analysis with Irish identification as the dependent variable. The interaction effect of manipulated Brexit threat \times Agreement with the manipulated information on Irish identification was not statistically significant, $b = 0.08$, $SE = .08$, $t(262) = 1.05$, $p = .295$, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.24]. Additionally, the effect of the manipulated Brexit threat on Irish identification was not statistically significant, $b = -0.15$, $SE = .11$, $t(262) = -1.38$, $p = .167$, 95% CI [-0.37, 0.06]. Only political allegiance was correlated significantly with the strength of Irish identification, $b = 0.33$, $SE = .12$, $t(262) = 2.76$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.57]. Specifically, participants who reported support for pro-United Ireland political

parties indicated stronger Irish identification ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 0.80$) than those who supported political parties without a pro-United Ireland agenda ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 0.91$). Hence, we did not find support for the hypothesis that Brexit economic threat affects Irish identification (H2).

Brexit Threat, Civic and Ethnic Nationalism

Subsequently, we computed the same analysis with civic and ethnic nationalism as the dependent variables. The interaction effect of manipulated Brexit threat \times Agreement with the manipulated information on civic nationalism was not statistically significant, $b = 0.08$, $SE = .10$, $t(262) = 0.74$, $p = .458$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.27]. The effect of the manipulated Brexit threat on civic nationalism was also not statistically significant, $b = -0.16$, $SE = .14$, $t(262) = -1.16$, $p = .246$, 95% CI [-0.44, 0.11]. Similarly, for ethnic nationalism, the interaction effect was not statistically significant, $b = 0.03$, $SE = .12$, $t(262) = 0.23$, $p = .818$, 95% CI [-0.21, 0.27]. Additionally, the effect of the manipulated Brexit threat on ethnic nationalism was not statistically significant, $b = -0.03$, $SE = .17$, $t(262) = -0.15$, $p = .882$, 95% CI [-0.36, 0.31].

Only political allegiance was correlated significantly with both civic, $b = 0.43$, $SE = .15$, $t(262) = 2.80$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.73], and ethnic nationalism, $b = 0.56$, $SE = .19$, $t(262) = 3.02$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.93]. Specifically, participants that reported support for pro-United Ireland political parties reported greater endorsement of civic ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.14$) and ethnic nationalism ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.38$) than not pro-United Ireland party supporters, (civic; $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.11$) and (ethnic; $M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.34$). Thus, we did not find support for our hypotheses that Brexit economic threat affects civic nationalism (H3) and ethnic nationalism (H4).

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables According to Economic Threat Condition and Political Allegiance*

Variables		High Economic	Low Economic	Total
		Threat	Threat	
		<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	
Agreement with Information	Pro-United Ireland	5.03 (1.22)	4.59 (1.59)	4.80 (1.43)
	Not Pro-United Ireland	4.80 (1.23)	4.25 (1.49)	4.55 (1.40)
	Total	4.89 (1.23)	4.35 (1.52)	
Support for a United Ireland	Pro-United Ireland	1.94 (3.56)	1.54 (3.78)	1.73 (3.66)
	Not Pro-United Ireland	0.41 (3.24)	0.97 (3.30)	0.68 (3.27)
	Total	0.81 (3.38)	1.13 (3.44)	
National Identification	Pro-United Ireland	6.37 (0.64)	6.33 (0.93)	6.35 (0.80)
	Not Pro-United Ireland	5.91 (0.93)	6.12 (0.88)	6.01 (0.91)
	Total	6.03 (0.89)	6.18 (0.89)	
Civic Nationalism	Pro-United Ireland	4.26 (1.11)	4.48 (1.17)	4.37 (1.14)
	Not Pro-United Ireland	3.88 (1.15)	3.96 (1.06)	3.92 (1.11)
	Total	3.98 (1.15)	4.11 (1.12)	
Ethnic Nationalism	Pro-United Ireland	4.33 (1.18)	4.12 (1.54)	4.22 (1.38)
	Not Pro-United Ireland	3.59 (1.42)	3.77 (1.25)	3.68 (1.34)
	Total	3.79 (1.39)	3.87 (1.35)	

Table 2. *Correlations Between Variables*

Variables	2	3	4	5
1. Agreement with Information	.06	-.002	.10	-.07
2. Support for a United Ireland		.07	.19**	.02
3. National Identification			.43***	.26***
4. Civic Nationalism				.38***
5. Ethnic Nationalism				

Note. ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Discussion

The present research aimed to investigate the impact of economic threat posed by Brexit on preferences for a United Ireland, strength of national identification and conceptualisation of the national group's boundaries, measured by civic and ethnic nationalism, in the Republic of Ireland. The results demonstrated that information about Brexit can affect perceived economic threat associated with Brexit depending on how much people agree with the information presented. More importantly, the findings show that presenting Brexit as an economic threat went along with more support for a United Ireland the more people agreed with the presented information. Additionally, differences were found between the high and the low economic threat conditions when participants disagreed with the information presented about Brexit. Therefore, our hypothesis that Brexit economic threat would affect support for a United Ireland was partially supported, when people disagreed with the information presented. Specifically, high economic Brexit threat information that people disagreed with led to lower support of a United Ireland than low economic Brexit threat information. However, the findings did not support our hypotheses that Brexit economic threat would alter Irish identification, civic nationalism, and ethnic nationalism.

In the Republic of Ireland, the economic consequences of Brexit present significant concerns for many businesses and people (Hayward, 2021). Forecasts predicted the Republic of Ireland's economy would be negatively impacted by the UK's departure from the EU (Copenhagen Economics, 2018, 2020). Our findings demonstrate some support for previous theorising suggesting that threats drive support for political solutions perceived to address those threats (Brandt et al., 2021; Eadeh & Chang, 2020). Specifically, we show that when people are presented with information framing Brexit as a high economic threat, disagreement with this perspective went along with decreased support for a United Ireland. In the low threat condition, there were no difference in levels of support for a United Ireland based on agreement with the information. Therefore, a United Ireland may offer a potential solution to people who are exposed to threatening information about Brexit, but this depends on how much they agree with this information.

Indeed, people who disagreed with the information in the high threat condition showed lower support for a United Ireland compared to those who disagreed in the low threat condition. Although, we expected the manipulation would exert its strongest effects on support for a United Ireland among those who agreed with the information, our findings align with previous research on how people respond to information received. According to previous research, when novel information contradicts existing beliefs, people may generate negative thoughts about the information, reinforcing their preexisting beliefs (Greenwald, 1968; Briñol & Petty, 2022). In our study, we observed this effect with threatening information. Specifically, our results suggest that when people are presented with information framing something as a threat that contradicts their own views, it can lead to reduced support for related political solutions—in this case, a United Ireland. Therefore, the findings highlight that people are not passive recipients of threatening information but actively interpret it based

on their own views, which has implications for how they respond to such information (Briñol & Petty, 2022; Eagly & Chaiken, 1995; Greenwald, 1968).

Our findings did not support the hypothesis that perceptions of Brexit as an economic threat would alter Irish identification. Previous research suggests that economic threat can strengthen national identities (Shayo, 2009; 2020), and, in the face of economic uncertainty, people often cleave to large social categories like the nation to restore a sense of security (Jay et al., 2019; Kinnvall, 2004; Reicher et al., 2010). However, in our study, levels of identification with the Irish national identity were high (in both economic threat conditions as indicated by the mean scores on the scale). This reflects previous research indicating that Irish people's identification with their nation is comparatively strong compared to other nations (Huddy & Del Ponte, 2019). This may explain the lack of an observed relationship, between perceived economic threat and strength of Irish identification.

Moreover, we found no significant differences in levels of civic or ethnic nationalism between the Brexit economic threat conditions. Prior research has shown that perceived economic inequality can lead to social exclusion (Jay et al., 2019; Jetten et al., 2015). When people perceive economic inequality as increasing, they can become less willing to include outsiders into their group (Jetten et al., 2015). In the UK, Brexit serves as a notable example of economic threat driving preferences to 'take back control' of borders and curb immigration (Macdougall et al., 2020; Van de Vyer et al., 2018). However, in our study, perceptions of who should be included within the national group, based on civic or ethnic principles, was not affected by the heightened economic threat stemming from Brexit. The ideological climate of a given national context can affect boundaries of the national community (Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2020). Hence, we suggest that perceptions of Brexit's economic threat may not be particularly relevant to informing boundaries of the national group because there is likely a different political and ideological concern related to Irish (re)unification at work.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

While there is generally support for a United Ireland in the Republic of Ireland (Garry et al., 2022; Loscher, 2023), our findings suggest that this support can diminish if people are presented with information about Brexit as a significant economic harm that contradicts their own views. Conversely, people may be more likely to support Irish unity if they are exposed to threatening information about Brexit that aligns with their views. These findings align with previous research from Northern Ireland, which indicates that Brexit threats are relevant to shaping preferences for a United Ireland (Shelly et al., 2023). Overall, this study offers valuable insights into how Brexit threats influence political dynamics in this specific context.

Practically, these findings suggest that political leaders who emphasise threats to advance their agendas may risk backlash if people disagree with the perceived severity or significance of those threats. Previous research has demonstrated that leaders strategically use threats to gain support for their political policies (e.g., Portice & Reicher, 2018). However, this study shows that the impact of such threats for political preferences is likely influenced by any preexisting views people have. For instance, if political leaders construct Brexit as a significant threat imposed on Ireland by Britain (Shelly et al., 2024), this may reduce support for solutions that orient to a United Ireland if people perceive the threat as exaggerated or irrelevant. Thus, people's own beliefs and perceptions can influence the effectiveness of political messages that emphasise threats for achieving political goals and may even lead to the opposite reaction in people, in this case Irish unity.

Political party allegiance emerged as a significant factor influencing preferences for a United Ireland, Irish identification, and civic and ethnic nationalism. Specifically, supporters of political parties advocating for a United Ireland demonstrated stronger endorsement of each of these outcome variables. While it may not come as a surprise that these political

supporters hold stronger beliefs in favour of Irish unity and have a stronger sense of Irish identification, it is interesting to note that their support for Irish unity political parties also correlates with stronger ideas about who belongs in the national group, as indicated by their heightened endorsement of both ethnic and civic notions of nationhood. Both civic and ethnic nationalism can erect barriers to inclusion in the national group (Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2020). As such, the stronger adherence to both civic and ethnic nationalism among supporters of Irish unity may suggest that their vision of Irish unity may not be as inclusive of the diversity of identities within Ireland. It is beyond the scope of this research to address what this relation between political allegiance and civic and ethnic nationalism may mean for the Republic of Ireland. This is an interesting avenue for future research to explore.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation of our study lies in its deviation from traditional experimental designs. While examining participants' preexisting beliefs about Brexit, as indicated by their agreement with the experimentally manipulated information, provided us with valuable insights into the effects of the economic threat conditions, our approach diverges from conventional experiments in its inability to yield direct cause-and-effect results. In other words, levels of support for a United Ireland were not solely influenced by the manipulated economic threat posed by Brexit. Instead, the effects of the experimental conditions on support for a United Ireland depended on participants' agreement with the information presented. However, we argue by that incorporating participants' preexisting beliefs about Brexit into our analysis provides ecological validity. This approach offers important insights into how threatening information about Brexit's economic impact can influence support for a United Ireland in the Republic of Ireland, depending on how much people agree with the information. Future research manipulating perceptions of threat in ongoing political situations

should also account for participants' preexisting views, as these beliefs play a role in shaping responses to information.

The generalisability of our findings is confined to the Republic of Ireland context. As such, we would not expect that information presented about Brexit will have the same effect in other contexts. Nevertheless, our study was motivated by recent calls to investigate threat at a more local level (Brandt et al., 2021). In this regard, we have shown that while the specific economic threat posed by Brexit did not affect the strength of national identity or conceptualisations of the boundaries of the national community, it is associated with local political preferences concerning the island of Ireland's constitutional future. Future research should continue to explore the relationship between threat and politics at a more local level.

Conclusion

The significance of threat to politics on a broader scale has been well established. However, there is a call to examine how threats operate at a more local level. This localised approach provides a deeper understanding of the specific political dynamics taking place within distinct contexts. In the context of the evolving Brexit landscape in the Republic of Ireland, our study demonstrates that the presentation and interpretation of Brexit threats can influence political views. Support for Irish unity may increase if people agree with the presented threat but attempts to amplify threat perceptions might reduce support for a United Ireland if people believe the Brexit threat is exaggerated. Therefore, using threat for political gain is unlikely to be effective and may even reduce support for political policies if it contradicts people's own experiences. Together, this study provides valuable insights into how Brexit's threat operates locally and offers important considerations for understanding the growing momentum towards a United Ireland in the Republic of Ireland.

CHAPTER FIVE

General Discussion and Final Conclusions

5.1 Chapter Overview

The aim of this thesis was to investigate how group identities and threats shape political preferences for Irish (re)unification in the wake of Brexit on the island of Ireland. Utilising a social identity approach, which emphasises analysing social phenomena within their specific contexts (Reicher, 2004), each study was informed by the social and political factors relevant to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as the motivations and norms of the identities involved. Accordingly, each study contributes distinct insights into answering the research question. The research first focused on how Nationalist/Republican political leaders utilise identity to promote their political of a United Ireland during the political upheaval generated by Brexit (Chapter 2). The research then turned to examine how identity, in particular identity strength, and perceived threats are associated with perceptions of Brexit as an opportunity for Irish unity among Nationalists and Republicans in Northern Ireland (Chapter 3). Finally, the perceived economic threat associated with Brexit was experimentally manipulated to assess its impact on support for a United Ireland (Chapter 4). Additionally, this chapter examined the effects on national identification and perceptions of national group boundaries, offering further insights into Brexit's effect in the Republic of Ireland. Through these three empirical studies, this thesis offers new insights into how identity and threat influence the political landscape during periods of significant change. The findings contribute to understanding the evolving political situation of Brexit in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, while also offering perspectives relevant to similar political shifts globally. In this final chapter, the research findings will be summarised and discussed, highlighting their theoretical and practical implications. The chapter will also address the limitations of the research and suggest directions for future studies.

5.2 Overview of Findings

Chapter 2 of this thesis aimed to identify how leaders of Sinn Féin, a Republican political party that opposed Brexit and viewed it as a threat, construct identities to advance their political agenda of Irish (re)unification in the aftermath of Brexit. Sinn Féin is a political party in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and to achieve a United Ireland, they need support from a majority in both regions (Renwick & Kelly, 2021). This context provided a unique opportunity to examine how leaders strategically construct group identities to make their political vision appeal to divided and polarised audiences.

Utilising a rhetorical psychology analysis, the findings illustrate how the Sinn Féin leaders strategically harnessed historical narratives and place identity to align with their vision of a United Ireland. They framed Ireland's historical division as a result of British influence, portraying Brexit as an extension of this division. This narrative framed Britain and Brexit as threats, reinforcing an 'us Ireland' versus 'them Britain' dynamic. This narrative constrained the leaders' ability to address the diverse perspectives of their audience on the island of Ireland, including Unionists who support Britain's sovereignty over Northern Ireland. When advocating for Irish unity, the leaders proposed ending Ireland's divided and conflicted history. They constructed a new place-based superordinate group centred around a shared attachment to the island of Ireland. This superordinate group permitted the leaders to address the diversity of their audiences while acknowledging important subgroup differences. They used this place-based superordinate group as a unifying strategy for promoting their agenda of a United Ireland. These findings offer novel insights into how leaders use place identity and historical discontinuity for strategic political purposes in post-conflict areas.

Chapter 3 built on the findings of Chapter 2 by investigating perceptions of Brexit as a potential opportunity for Irish (re)unification among those who identify with the

Nationalist/Republican political identity in Northern Ireland. It examined whether the strength of Nationalists' group identification and the perceived threat of Brexit are linked to this perception. Among a representative sample of Nationalists, the first study of this chapter examined the relationship between Nationalist's strength of identification and the belief that Brexit has increased the likelihood of a United Ireland. The results showed that stronger Nationalists' identification was associated with the belief that Brexit has made the goal of a United Ireland more likely. In Study 2b, the role of perceived Brexit threat was explored as a mediator between identity strength and perceptions of Brexit as an opportunity. The findings indicated that perceived Brexit threat mediated this relationship: strong group identification among Nationalists was associated with perceiving more Brexit threat, which in turn was associated with seeing a United Ireland as more likely. These results support previous research suggesting that strong group identities influence people's perceptions of political realities, leading strong identifiers to reinforce their group's political preferences during times of uncertainty (Huddy et al., 2018; Huddy & Del Ponte, 2019; Loughnane et al., 2023). The findings extend previous research by demonstrating that even in the face of perceived threats people can see potential political opportunities for their group (e.g., Reicher & Hopkins, 2012), especially if they have a strong group identity and alternatives to the status quo are available.

Chapter 4 extended these findings by experimentally manipulating perceived Brexit threat in the Republic of Ireland, focussing on the specific economic threat associated with this political change, and examining its impact on support for a United Ireland. Due to previous research that highlights economic threat can heighten national identification and social exclusion, the chapter also examined how this Brexit economic threat may impact Irish identification and perceptions of national group boundaries. The study presented Brexit as either a high or low economic threat to Irish nationals using fictitious information. Given the

prevalence and wide coverage of Brexit in Irish society, the study also examined participants' preexisting beliefs about Brexit, as indicated by their agreement with the information presented during the manipulation, as a potential moderator. The results demonstrated that high threatening information went along with more support for a United Ireland the more people agreed with the information that Brexit poses an economic threat to the Republic of Ireland. Furthermore, disagreement with high-threat information significantly decreased support for a United Ireland compared to disagreement with information in the low-threat condition. Overall, the findings suggest that in the Republic of Ireland, a United Ireland might be seen as a viable solution to Brexit when people agree with threatening information about Brexit. However, support can decrease if people disagree with the threatening information.

While perceived economic threats from Brexit did not significantly affect Irish identification or perceptions of national group boundaries, support for pro-United Ireland political parties was linked to endorsing more exclusive group boundaries, as indicated in civic and ethnic nationalism. This suggests that people who support pro-United Ireland parties may hold more strongly defined views about who is included in the national group, potentially excluding those who do not conform to their civic and ethnic ideals of Irishness.

Collectively, the thesis provides insights into how constructions of identity, group identification, and threats have catalysed renewed discussions about the island of Ireland's constitutional future in the wake of Brexit. By applying the social identity approach to understand this evolving political situation, the research has generated important implications for both theoretical frameworks and practical applications.

5.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Place Identity as a Superordinate Identity

The present findings offer theoretical and practical insights into how leaders may use place identity to promote a superordinate group in politically divided contexts marked by identity threats. The social identity approach to intergroup leadership suggests that in contexts marked by hostile intergroup divisions, leaders seeking to appeal across these divides should focus on creating an intergroup relational identity (Hogg et al., 2012). This superordinate identity centres on the intergroup relationship as its foundation, emphasising collaboration while preserving the distinctiveness of each subgroup (Hogg et al., 2012). In line with this approach, Chapter 2 highlights how the Sinn Féin leaders harnessed people's shared attachment to the island of Ireland as a foundation for constructing a superordinate group among polarised identities. This research shows that building this superordinate group rooted in the physical landscape of Ireland allowed for the distinct cultural, ethnic and national identities to coexist while acknowledging their important differences (Abell et al., 2006; Neufeld & Schmitt, 2018). Consistent with previous research, by referencing their shared 'island' status, the leaders promoted a collaborative and interdependent relationship among subgroups (Abell et al., 2006). This strategy is essential for leaders to reduce identity threat and bridge intergroup divides (e.g., Kershaw et al., 2021a; 2021b). Therefore, this research illustrates the ways in which leaders navigate identity dynamics to influence political behaviour in a real-world setting. While previous research on intergroup leadership has been conducted through experimental methods (e.g., Kershaw et al., 2020a; Kershaw et al., 2020b; Rast et al., 2018), this study bridges the gap between experimental findings and real-world applications.

This research contrasts with traditional approaches to forming superordinate identities, which typically emphasise commonalities between subgroups to create an overarching group (Dovidio et al., 2009; Gaertner et al., 1993). Such methods often encounter challenges, such as ingroup projection, where the dominant group imposes its identity onto the superordinate group, leading to resistance and deepening intergroup divisions (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Wenzel et al., 2003). In contrast, the findings here demonstrate how the physical landscape can serve as a foundation for developing a superordinate identity that both acknowledges and incorporates subgroup differences (Hogg et al., 2012). Thus, place identity meets the criteria for developing a superordinate identity that is defined by the collaborative and interdependent relationship formed through sharing the same physical space (e.g., Hogg et al., 2012). This theoretical insight advances understandings of how superordinate identities can be constructed to respect subgroup distinctiveness while fostering intergroup collaboration.

However, it is important to acknowledge that in the current context, where territorial claims are a source of conflict, the potential for place identity to serve as a superordinate group is uncertain. While previous research has highlighted the potential of a superordinate place identity to foster engagement among different subgroups (Abell et al., 2006; Neufeld & Schmitt, 2018), its ability to function effectively in a deeply divided society remains unexplored. This research highlights how leaders in such a context strategically use place identity to promote specific political agendas (e.g., Hopkins & Dixon, 2006).

Leaders Harnessing Historical (Dis)continuity

The research provides important theoretical insights by demonstrating the role of place identity in providing continuity during times of political uncertainty. Previous studies have highlighted historical continuity, the perception that the group has a stable and enduring

identity over time, as an important psychological resource for group members (Sani, 2008; Sani et al., 2008; Sani et al., 2009). In contexts where a group's identity faces existential threats, the need for continuity becomes even more pronounced, often resulting in increased resistance to political changes perceived as disruptive (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2015). This research expands on existing understandings by showing how place identities, which offer people an ongoing connection to their past and future (Bowe, 2012), can be strategically used in political rhetoric to maintain continuity. Specifically, Chapter 2 shows how the Sinn Féin leaders used place identity as a rhetorical strategy to bridge people's psychological connection to the current Ireland with the envisioned future of a United Ireland. The leaders depicted a United Ireland as a continuation of people's deep-rooted attachment to the island of Ireland, thus attempting to preserve a sense of continuity and stability for those who might otherwise view the political change as a threat to their identity. This approach is particularly significant in the case of Unionists, whose identity is closely tied to Northern Ireland's status within the UK (Todd, 2021). Therefore, these findings contribute new theoretical insights into how place identity can provide continuity during political transitions and demonstrate that leaders can strategically leverage this attachment to place to advance their political objectives (Abell et al., 2006; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Hopkins & Dixon, 2006).

Chapter 2's analysis also highlights historical discontinuity as a strategic rhetorical tool for advancing a political vision within a deeply divided context. While previous research has demonstrated that breaking from a conflicted or troubled past can help groups move forward and improve intergroup relations (Obradović & Bowe, 2021; Roth et al., 2017), this study extends this understanding by showing how leaders can use historical discontinuity for political gain. Specifically, the Sinn Féin leaders depicted their political goal of a United Ireland as a break from Ireland's divided past, presenting it as a foundation for a more harmonious future. This strategy also served to avoid acknowledging past wrongdoings and

taking responsibility for the potential role of their party and supporters in previous conflicts (Doosje et al., 1998; Murray & Durrheim, 2019, 2021; Obradović & Bowe, 2021). Hence, this research not only supports previous findings on the benefits of historical discontinuity in post-conflict societies but also extends them by highlighting its use to advance political objectives in such contexts.

Identity, Threats and Political Preferences

Building on previous research that shows that shifts in social context can reshape how people perceive and define their group identity -including its values, norms and beliefs (Hopkins et al., 2006; Hopkins & Reicher, 2011)- this thesis offers theoretical insights into the dynamic nature of group identities during significant political changes. Specifically, it shows how such upheavals can create new opportunities for groups to redefine their identities and pursue their political goals. Initially, Nationalists/Republicans largely opposed Brexit and voted against it in line with their established group norms (Garry, 2016, cf. Hoey, 2019). However, as evidenced in Studies 1 and 2, Brexit has increasingly been framed by this group as an opportunity to advance Irish unity. This research, therefore, contributes to the theoretical understanding of identity dynamics by showing that, in times of significant political upheaval, group identities can strategically adapt to and capitalise on changing circumstances to further their agendas.

Moreover, the findings from this research extend understandings of how threatening situations can be reframed positively within a political context. According to the social identity approach, access to cognitive alternatives- the ability to envision better future possibilities than the current status quo- enables group members to reframe threats in a positive light and improve their circumstances (Iyer et al., 2017; Reicher & Haslam, 2006). Chapter 2 illustrated how Republican political leaders portrayed a United Ireland as a better

future alternative to the threatening Brexit imposed by Britain. Chapter 3 further demonstrated that among Nationalists/Republicans in Northern Ireland, perceiving Brexit as a threat was positively associated with the belief that Brexit could facilitate the achievement of a United Ireland. Thus, the present research contributes new theoretical insights by showing how threats can be reframed as opportunities in political contexts where alternatives to the status quo are available and actively promoted by political leaders. Furthermore, it highlights that this reframing process is linked to strong group identification.

Accordingly, these findings also advance research on the role of strong group identification in shaping perceptions of the political context. Previous studies have emphasised the powerful influence of group identification in determining how individuals perceive political realities (Huddy, 2013). It has been shown that people with strong group identification are more likely to perceive threats (Riek et al., 2006) and to defend their group when it is threatened (de Hoog, 2013). Building on this, the findings from Chapter 3 show that strong group identification among Nationalists was linked not only to heightened perceptions of Brexit threat, but to reframing these threats as an opportunity to achieve Irish unity. This suggests that strong group identification may not only be linked to heightened perception of threats but also may help to frame these threats as potential opportunities.

The findings of Chapter 4 provide further insights into the dynamics of threat and politics. While previous research has demonstrated that support for political policies and ideologies can increase if they are seen as an effective solution to address threats in the environment (Brandt et al., 2021; Eadeh & Chang, 2020), this study emphasises that the presentation and interpretation of threatening information can affect support for political policies. Specifically, the study shows that when participants in the Republic of Ireland strongly disagreed with fictitious information portraying Brexit as a high economic threat, their support for a United Ireland decreased. In contrast, when participants disagreed with

information presenting Brexit as a low economic threat to the Republic of Ireland, their support for a United Ireland remained unchanged. These findings suggest that exposure to novel threatening information can provoke a strong reaction in individuals (e.g., Greenwald, 1968; Briñol & Petty, 2022). This theoretical insight advances understanding by highlighting the importance of not just the presence of a threat, but how the threat is framed and the perceived validity of the information that can influence political attitudes.

Chapter 4 also highlights the value of examining threats at a more localised level (Brandt et al., 2021). This study specifically investigated the implications of the economic threat posed by Brexit. The results indicate that while Brexit's economic threat does influence political support, it does not affect national identification (e.g., Shayo 2009; 2020) or perceptions of national group boundaries (e.g., Jetten et al., 2015), contrary to previous research on economic threat. These findings, therefore, demonstrate the value of a localised approach to studying threats, as it offers deeper insights into specific threats operating within society and enhances our understanding of their unique contextualised impacts.

In practical terms, the present findings suggest that the strengthening of political identities following Brexit (Hayward & Rosher, 2020) has contributed to a shared political outlook among Nationalists on achieving a United Ireland from the Brexit context (e.g., Huddy, 2013). Similarly, heightened identification among Unionists has likely reinforced their political stance, as seen in their ongoing rejection of the Protocol/Windsor Framework and their recent refusal to form a government in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the increasing discussions about a United Ireland pose a significant threat to Unionists (Todd, 2021). This combination of strengthened political identities and heightened threats in Northern Ireland could lead to further polarisation between these two groups, increasing the risk of intergroup conflict. Indeed, the potential for violent conflict was evident in April 2021, when the implementation of the Irish Sea border as part of the Brexit agreements triggered violent riots

in predominantly Loyalist areas. Consequently, it is crucial for policymakers to carefully manage these threat perceptions when addressing Brexit-related issues or considering plans for a United Ireland, to prevent further escalation of tensions and conflicts.

To understand political change across different contexts, this thesis demonstrates the utility of the social identity approach. This approach provides predictions about identity processes, rather than specific behaviours, making it a valuable tool to examine the underlying processes that drive political and social dynamics across diverse cultures (Hopkins & Reicher, 2011). In line with predictions outlined by the social identity approach, this thesis highlights that group identities are a tool for social influence that can be strategically harnessed to shape society (Reicher et al., 2005; Turner, 2005). In particular, this thesis has demonstrated the role of leaders in shaping group identities, which in turn influences how group members perceive and respond to political situations (Haslam et al., 2020; Reicher et al., 2005). As such, the social identity approach offers a robust framework for analysing political change across contexts, providing valuable insights into how groups respond to and engage with political developments.

5.4 Project Limitations and Future Directions

Brexit reignited debates over identity and Northern Ireland's constitutional status. In 2019, post-Brexit, the number of people identifying as 'neither' Unionist nor Nationalist was the lowest in 15 years, while Nationalist identification reached its highest level since 1998—the end of the Northern Ireland conflict (Hayward & Rosher, 2020). Given this context, this thesis focussed solely on people who identify as Irish in the Republic of Ireland and Nationalist/Republican in Northern Ireland. While the research has provided important insights into how identities and threats shape political preferences for Irish unity following Brexit among these groups, it does not address the perspectives of the Unionist community.

Unionists' experiences differ markedly from those of Nationalists and Irish in the Republic of Ireland, especially concerning the Irish Sea border and the growing support for (re)unification (Shelly & Muldoon, 2022). Therefore, this thesis does not capture the full range of experiences within Northern Ireland. To gain a comprehensive understanding of Brexit's effects on the island of Ireland, future studies should investigate the experiences of Unionists and those who do not identify with either of these political groups, using a social identity approach.

Indeed, focusing solely on Nationalists/Republicans in Northern Ireland could be perceived as perpetuating divisive narratives within the region. The prevailing 'two communities' narrative, which dominates analyses of the region, can be insufficient to describe the complexities of identity within Northern Ireland (Hayward & McManus, 2019). While the traditional Nationalist and Unionist divisions are deeply entrenched in Northern Ireland's political institutions (Mac Ginty, 2003), there is a growing segment of the population that identifies as 'neither Unionist nor Nationalist', signalling a rejection of these polarising labels across Irish and British communities (Hayward & McManus, 2019). Researching only one side of this divide may, therefore, be seen as narrow in scope. Nonetheless, this research on identity and threat among Nationalist/Republicans following Brexit offers important insights for contemporary politics and society in Northern Ireland. Future research that includes the perspectives of Unionists and those who identify as 'neither' would further enrich this understanding.

This thesis utilised a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, allowing different features of the same research question to be explored (Todd et al., 2004). However, a limitation is the absence of longitudinal data. While Chapter 2 analysed leaders' speeches over a five-year period following the 2016 Brexit referendum, Study 2 (Chapter 3) is restricted to the year 2020, a time marked by significant political uncertainty due to the Brexit

transition period. That said, Study 3 (Chapter 4) conducted in 2024, demonstrates that threats continue to influence attitudes toward Irish unity, supporting Study 2's findings. Longitudinal studies examining the effects of group identification and threats over extended periods could provide insights into the resilience or volatility of preferences for Irish unity amidst sociopolitical change.

While this research argues that Brexit has heightened perceptions of opportunity among Nationalists/Republicans, the analysis relied on the perceived likelihood of a United Ireland due to Brexit as a proxy for measuring this sense of opportunity. This approach was based on available data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey. However, it is argued that among a sample of self-categorised Nationalist/Republicans, who are identified by their political goal of Irish (re)unification, the perception that Brexit has increased the likelihood of achieving their political goal of a United Ireland is a valid construct for measuring perceived opportunity. Furthermore, the hypothesised relationships, that strong group Nationalist identification and perceived Brexit threat would be associated with perceiving a greater likelihood of a United Ireland, were supported by the findings. To build on this, future research should explicitly measure perceptions of Brexit as an opportunity, offering a more direct assessment that could complement the current research.

This research provides the first qualitative exploration of the principles outlined in intergroup leadership theory, offering significant theoretical contributions to understanding how leaders construct identities in intergroup contexts characterised by historical conflict and threats. Given the key role leaders' rhetoric plays in constructing identities (Hogg et al., 2012; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), this qualitative approach was essential. However, the current thesis does not evaluate the effectiveness of this rhetoric in building a superordinate group among divided groups. To address this limitation, future research should employ experimental methods to test how leaders' rhetoric, particularly in constructing a

superordinate group rooted in place identity as described in Chapter 2, impacts perceptions of leaders' effectiveness and influences intergroup relations in divided contexts.

Indeed, the potential for place identity to improve intergroup relations presents an interesting avenue for future research. Chapter 2 illustrated how, in a divided society, a superordinate group can be built through a shared connection to place. Unlike national identity, which can be contested and divisive, place identity does not invoke the same national affiliations, making it a less contentious and more inclusive approach (Abell et al., 2006). Emphasising a shared connection to place may promote a sense of collaboration between groups. Future studies should investigate whether the use of a superordinate place identity can improve intergroup relations in divided societies. For example, experimental approaches could explore how highlighting shared geographical ties to the island of Ireland influences intergroup bias and perceived compatibility between these historically divided communities. Such research could provide empirical support for the use of place identity as a tool for promoting social cohesion in polarised contexts.

Finally, the findings of this research could be further explored using psychophysiological methods, which would provide an objective measure of threat. Future studies could investigate physiological threat responses to threatening information about Brexit (as discussed in Chapter 4), or to leaders' rhetoric about Brexit (as analysed in Chapter 2). Additionally, in line with Chapter 3, research could examine whether emphasising Brexit threats versus opportunities- referred to as 'challenge' in the literature- elicits different physiological stress responses (e.g., Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Scheepers et al., 2012). Such investigations would offer valuable insights into how political contexts impact psychological stress and overall health.

5.5 Conclusion

By examining the ‘Brexit Effect’ on the island of Ireland through the lens of the social identity approach, this thesis bridges theory with real-world application. Collectively, it has demonstrated that identity and threats play a crucial role in shaping the political landscape during significant political changes. Firstly, it illustrates how political leaders strategically use identity and threats to advance their political agendas amidst a period of political uncertainty. Building on this, the research shows that members of political groups can become focused on how they can benefit from the political situation during such times, and this is associated with strong group identification and perceived threats. Expanding on both of these findings, the research further demonstrates that the way threatening information is constructed and interpreted influences support for political policies. This comprehensive investigation not only deepens our understanding of the current political dynamics on the island of Ireland but also highlights the importance of identity and threats in understanding responses to transformative political change in other contexts.

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Appendices
APPENDIX 1

Study 1

Rhetorical analysis of Leaders' Speeches

1.1. Data – Sinn Féin Leader Speeches to Annual Conference 2017- 2022

Date	Title of Speeches	Speakers
17/11/2017	No Title given	Gerry Adams (former President of Sinn Féin and leader in the Republic of Ireland), Michelle O'Neill (vice president of Sinn Féin and leader in Northern Ireland)
17/6/2018	Vision for a new Ireland	Mary Lou McDonald (current President of Sinn Féin and leader in the Republic of Ireland), Michelle O'Neill
16/11/2019	No Title given	Mary Lou MacDonalld, Michelle O'Neill
2020	No speeches due to Covid-19 pandemic	-
30/10/2021	Time for Change	Mary Lou McDonald, Michelle O'Neill
05/11/2022	Time for Change	Mary Lou McDonald, Michelle O'Neill

1.2. Overview of Themes, Codes and Extracts

Themes	Codes	Extracts
1. Brexit as political déjà vu	Brexit is a threat to all of Ireland	<p>“Brexit represents the greatest economic threat to the island of Ireland in a generation.” (O’Neill, 2018)</p> <p>“But there is no good Brexit.” (O’Neill, 2019)</p>
	Britain as a threat/oppressor	<p>“I am absolutely opposed to the British Government dragging us out of the EU against our will.” (O’Neill, 2018)</p> <p>“We’re being dragged out of the EU and into a little Englander nightmare.” (O’Neill, 2019)</p> <p>“However, the new red lines set out by the British Government begs the question do they want a solution at all? “ (O’Neill, 2021)</p> <p>“The British State also want to continue to hide their role during the conflict here. They remain intent on introducing an amnesty to protect British soldiers who murdered Irish citizens here.” (O’Neill, 2021)</p> <p>“Propping up a Tory government that glories in wilful ignorance, and indifference to Ireland is not the way forward. Allowing the Tories to dodge, equivocate and engage in fantasy non-solutions to the Irish question is certainly not the answer.” (McDonald, 2018)</p>

‘Us’ Ireland

“We have successfully defended Ireland’s interests” (O’Neill, 2019)

“It will not become Ireland’s problem.”
(McDonald, 2018)

‘Them’ Britain

“Propping up a Tory government that glories in wilful ignorance, and indifference to Ireland is not the way forward. Allowing the Tories to dodge, equivocate and engage in fantasy non-solutions to the Irish question is certainly not the answer. If the architects of Brexit still can’t agree what Brexit looks like, well that’s their problem” (McDonald, 2017)

“They attack the Good Friday Agreement. An Agreement that has delivered twenty-five years of peace, a peace consistently defended by our partners in Europe, the United States and beyond. They disgracefully seek amnesty for their troops and deny victims of the conflict justice. They attack the Protocol. An Agreement that protects livelihoods and our economy. They care so very little about Ireland. “ (McDonald, 2022)

“I have this week reminded the British government that a majority in the North see the Protocol as the solution to their disastrous Brexit. “ (O’Neill, 2021).

“The British politics and the British political system is in meltdown. Their reckless Brexit, that we didn’t vote for is being forced upon us – By a Government that we didn’t vote for – By a Westminster system that will never ever represent our interests.” (O’Neill, 2019)

“The DUP have saddled up to the Tories and have treated the people here with contempt . And that’s caused huge anger and provoked a response that’s never been seen before and people from all traditions have united in saying enough is enough to the DUP and the Tories and the Brexiteers” (O’ Neill, 2019)

“I fully respect the right of the British people to leave the EU and I wish them well”
(O’Neill, 2018)

“I mean they [Tories] can’t run their own country without bringing it to the brink of financial ruin. They certainly have no right to tell the people of Ireland how to run ours.”
(McDonald, 2022)

“They attack the Good Friday Agreement. An Agreement that has delivered twenty-five years of peace, a peace consistently defended by our partners in Europe, the United States and beyond. They disgracefully seek amnesty for their troops and deny victims of the conflict justice. They attack the Protocol. An Agreement that protects livelihoods and our economy. They care so very little about Ireland.” (McDonald, 2022)

‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ dynamics

“Britain is divided! Ireland is united!”

(O’Neill, 2018)

“The British politics and the British political system is in meltdown. Their reckless Brexit, that we didn’t vote for is being forced upon us – By a Government that we didn’t vote for – By a Westminster system that will never ever represent our interests.” (O’Neill, 2019)

“If Brexit demonstrates anything its that the British Parliament has never and will never act in our interests” (O’Neill, 2019)

“The DUP have saddled up to the Tories and have treated the people here with contempt. And that’s caused huge anger and provoked a response that’s never been seen before and people from all traditions have united in saying enough is enough to the DUP and the Tories and the Brexiteers” (O’Neill, 2019)

Historically fraught relations

“This includes the continued fight back against the brutal British government austerity endured by citizens in recent years, and the threat that’s posed by Brexit to our economy, to our people, to our public services.” (O’Neill, 2017)

“Brexit has vindicated the Republican analysis that we must turn our back on

Westminster, our interests will never ever be served there.” (O’Neill, 2019)

“If Brexit demonstrates anything its that the British Parliament has never and will never act in our interests” (O’Neill, 2019)

“The British State also want to continue to hide their role during the conflict here. They remain intent on introducing an amnesty to protect British soldiers who murdered Irish citizens here.” (O’Neill, 2021)

**2. Who we
could
become** **Change on the
horizon**

“You join this movement at a truly defining period in Irish history , not least in the context of Brexit .” (O’Neill, 2018)

“The political momentum on change is moving in this direction . Sinn Féin wants a New Ireland, a fairer Ireland, and a united Ireland” (O’Neill, 2018).

“A Unity Referendum is coming and we need to be prepared for it.” (O’Neill, 2018)

“This is a defining period in our history. The opportunities for real change are within our grasp. It is time to hear all the voices within this debate. We must continue our journey of dialogue, of listening, of sharing ideas because in the New Ireland there can only be a victory for us all.” (O’Neill, 2018)

“There is a conversation now underway across this island and it’s an unstoppable

conversation. And it's a conversation like I'm sure many of you here have never witnessed before. It is no longer a question of if – it's a question of when the Unity referendum will be held. “ (O'Neill, 2019)

“We live in politically uncertain times. However, I am certain of two things. Firstly, that a referendum on Irish Unity is coming. Secondly, that the foundations of a New Ireland are being laid.” (O'Neill, 2019)

“Comrades, huge change is on the horizon and it's already underway, we can see it everyday. This is a time for big ideas. It's a time to prepare and a time to plan for the future. “ (O'Neill, 2021)

“Change is in the air. Brexit has changed everything. Many people, for the first time, are now considering their future in a United Ireland. “ (McDonald, 2019)

“Friends, We face into a decade of opportunity” (McDonald, 2019)

“And we are here to build new and united Ireland in our time. The cynics and the critics say it can't be done. Well they are wrong. They are stuck in yesterday and we strive for tomorrow.” (McDonald, 2021).

“A 159haired, we live in the end days of partition. On the cusp of an historic opportunity – the reunification of our country and our people.” (McDonald, 2022)

“This is our moment to write our chapter in our nation's story.” (McDonald, 2022)

Transcending Divisions

“There is an equal place for everybody in a new Ireland. Ireland is no longer simply orange and green. Ireland is a rainbow of identities and cultures. A place where diversity and difference can be embraced.”
(Mdonald, 2018)

“The opportunity now exists over this decade to bring people together. “ (O’Neill, 2019)

“As we approach the centenary of partition let’s not refight battles of the past.” (O’Neill, 2019)

“This is not about victories, this about something better for us all. “

“It is a time to bring people together in harmony and friendship.” (O’Neill, 2019)

“And it is time to unite all of the people who share this island” (O’Neill, 2019)

“And this new Ireland must be home for Unionists. We need to understand that. We need to find ways to talk about the future. We need to find ways to reconcile the past. And these aren’t easy things to do. Because people have suffered, were hurt, endured pain, inflicted pain. And we can’t make that go away but we can say sorry to each other. And I believe it is important that we do.”

(McDonald, 2018)

“The past was for those who seek to divide. The future is for those of us who seek to unite.” (McDonald, 2019)

“Shaping a future for everyone. Moving forward in the belief that there is no ‘them’. There is only ‘us’. “ (McDonald, 2022)
“Let’s build the nation home for all. No one left out. Nobody left behind.” (McDonald, 2018)

Using place as a platform to include to all identities in vision for United Ireland.

“There is an equal place for everybody in a new Ireland... A place where diversity and difference can be embraced.” (McDonald, 2018)

“This is your home. This is your Ireland.” (McDonald, 2018)

“alongside initiating a mature, inclusive debate about new political arrangements which serve all of us who share this island better” (O’Neill, 2018)

“We want reunification not just for Republicans but for everyone who shares this island.” (O’Neill, 2019)

“Comrades, we are entering a decade of opportunity where the freedom to choose our own future will be decided by the people on this island alone” (O’Neill, 2019)

“And it is time to unite all of the people who share this island and seize what is the opportunity of a lifetime. “ (O’Neill, 2019)

“And change isn’t just about us, it’s about everyone who shares this island.” (O’Neill, 2019)

“Our new Ireland allows us all to live in harmony under the one free sky in the place that we call home.” (McDonald, 2018)

“Well the Tories can leave governing of this island to the people who live here, and we will shape a better future together.”
(McDonald, 2022)

“Us who call Ireland home. We can build a nation home for all our people.” (McDonald, 2022).

“This is your place. This is your home.”
(McDonald, 2022)

“Let’s build the nation home for all.”
(McDonald, 2022)

Inclusivity

“There is no contradiction in declaring and delivering on our commitment to power sharing with unionism and a functioning Assembly whilst also alongside initiating a mature, inclusive debate about new political arrangements which serve all of us who share this island better.” (O’Neill, 2018)

“Similarly, there is no contradiction whatsoever in unionism working the existing constitutional arrangements while taking its rightful place in the conversation about what

a New Ireland would look like.” (O’Neill, 2018)

“It is time to hear all the voices within this debate. We must continue our journey of dialogue, of listening, of sharing ideas because in the New Ireland there can only be a victory for us all. “ (O’Neill, 2018)

“Let’s lead the change, let’s bring people with us, let’s shape the future together.” (O’Neill, 2018)

“So it’s time for us all to be part of the conversation.” (O’Neill, 2019)

“So this is the time for big ideas and inclusive conversations, ambitious plans and generosity.” (O’Neill, 2019)

“There is only ‘us’. Us who call Ireland home.” (McDonald, 2022)

“Some are apprehensive about Irish Unity. I want you to know that in a new Ireland you will be cherished, included, respected as equal citizens.” (McDonald, 2022)

“Let’s build the nation home for all. No one left out. Nobody left behind.” (McDonald, 2018)

New Ireland is an improved Ireland

“Ireland is changing. A new and better Ireland is emerging.” (McDonald, 2018)

“Sinn Féin wants a New Ireland, a fairer Ireland, and a united Ireland.” (O’Neill, 2018)

“in the New Ireland there can only be a victory for us all.” (O’Neill, 2018)

“Let’s present our vision for a new and agreed Ireland .” (O’Neill, 2019)

“Not only do we dream of a better, modern, and united Ireland; we are building it today.” (McDonald, 2018)

“Let’s change Ireland. Let’s choose courage, ambition, belief” (McDonald, 2022)

APPENDIX 2

Study 2

2.1. Study 2b National Identities

National Identity	N
Irish	115
Northern Irish	36
Irish & EU	17
Irish & Northern Irish	11
EU	11
Irish & NI & EU	10
British	5
Other	3
Irish & British	2
Irish & NI & EU & British	2
EU & British	1
NI & EU	1
British & Other	1
Total	215

Note: Northern Irish (NI) and EU citizen (EU)

Open responses for 'Other' National Identity:

- 1) Canadian
- 2) Scottish
- 3) Indian
- 4) English

2.2. Study 2b Religious Identities

Religion	N
Catholic	165
No Religion	28
Other	11
Catholic & Not Religious	7
Protestant	3
Catholic & Other	1
Total	215

Open responses for 'Other' Religion:

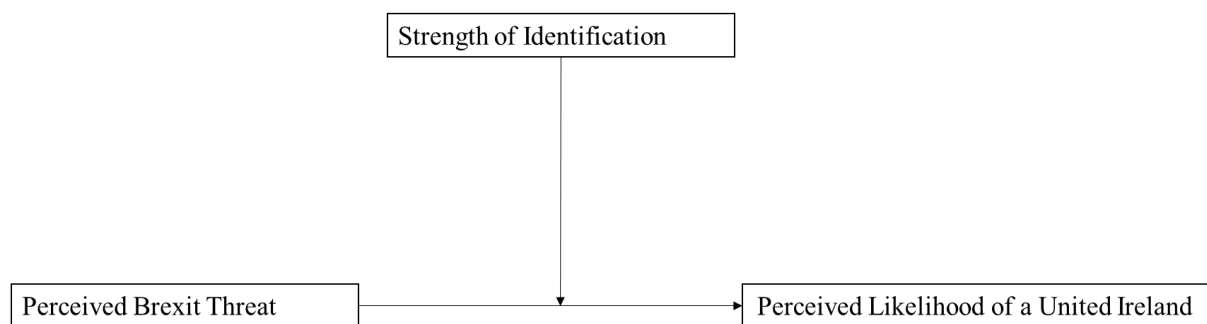
- 1) Agnostic
- 2) None
- 3) Christian
- 4) Christian but not belonging to any church
- 5) Not religious
- 6) Atheist raised Catholic, however.
- 7) Non practicing Catholic
- 8) Catholic background but not catholic now
- 9) A person of faith who declines association with politicised 'religions'

2.3. Study 2b Alternative Moderation Model

X= Threat

W= Strength of identification

Y= Perception of Brexit as an opportunity for a united Ireland



b1 path (X regressed on Y) = $b = 0.41$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(3, 634) = 9.72$, $p < .001$

b2 path (W regressed on Y) = $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(3, 634) = 3.68$, $p < .001$

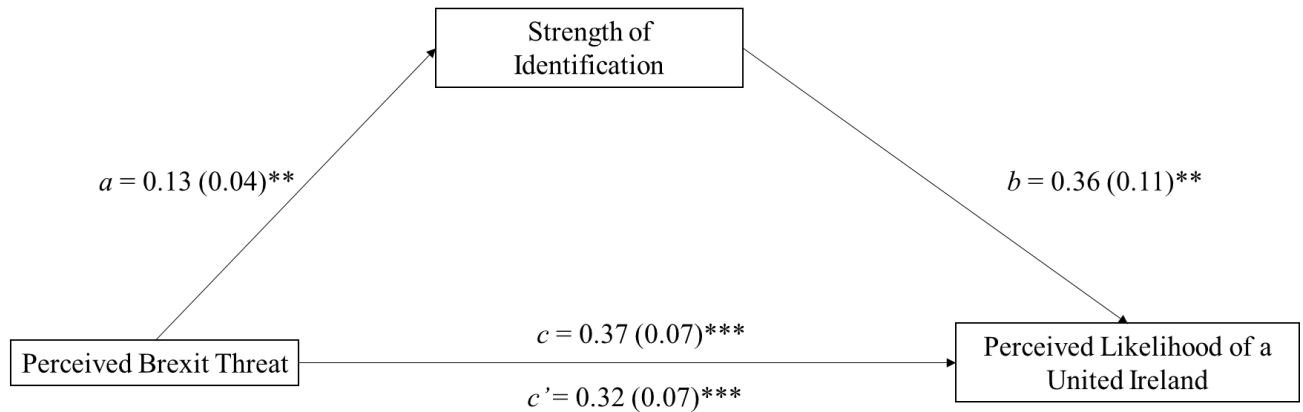
b3 path (X*W regressed on Y) = $b = -0.04$, $SE = .06$, $t(3, 634) = -0.86$, $p = .497$

2.4. Study 2b Alternative Mediation Model

X = Threat

M = Strength of identification

Y = Perception of Brexit as an opportunity for a united Ireland



*Note: Unstandardised coefficients with standard errors in the bracket; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. The total effect is reported above the line, the direct effect below the line.*

a path = $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(1, 213) = 3.06$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.21].

b path = $b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(2, 212) = 3.16$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.59].

c path = $b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(1, 213) = 5.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.51].

c' path = $b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(2, 212) = 4.58$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.46].

Indirect effect $b = 0.05$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [0.006, 0.10].

Model fit $R^2 = 0.15$, $F(2, 212) = 19.22$, $p < .001$

2.5. Study 2a Quantitative Survey Study

Study 2a items from Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2020

Self-Categorisation

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither?

- Unionist
- Nationalist
- Neither
- Other (please write in)
- Don't know

Group Identification

Would you call yourself a very strong (unionist/nationalist), fairly strong, or not very strong?

- Very strong
- Fairly strong
- Not very strong
- Don't know

Perceived Likelihood of a United Ireland

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?

- More likely
- Less likely
- Has made no difference
- Don't know

2.6. Study 2b Cross-sectional survey

Self-Categorisation

Please answer the following questions based on your personal view rather than your formal citizenship

I agree to the statements above and I consent to taking part in this research study

In terms of **religion**, I think about myself as ... (indicate as many as apply to you)

- A member of the Protestant community
- A member of the Catholic community
- Other (please specify)
- Not religious

In terms of **nationality**, I think about myself as ...(indicate as many as apply to you)

- EU citizen
- Northern Irish
- British
- Irish
- Other (please specify)

In terms of **politics**, I think about myself as ... (indicate as many as apply to you)

- Unionist
- Nationalist
- Loyalist
- Republican
- Other (please specify)

Please tick the appropriate box for each of the following items.

1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree.

Group Identification

Solidarity

I feel committed to Irish people

Satisfaction

I think that Irish people have a lot to be proud of

Centrality

Irish people are important to me

In-Group Homogeneity

Irish people have a lot in common with each other

Individual Self-Stereotyping

I have a lot in common with the average Irish person

Perceived Brexit Threat

To what extent does Brexit make you feel threatened?

To what extent does Brexit make you feel good?

To what extent does Brexit make you feel worried?

Perceived Opportunity

To what extent does the UK leaving the European Union make a United Ireland more likely?

Demographics

How old are you?

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other

APPENDIX 3

Study 3

3.1. Overview of participants' political and religious affiliations

Political Affiliation	<i>n</i> (%)
Sinn Féin	73 (27.3%)
Fine Gael	49 (18.4%)
Independents	45 (16.9%)
Social Democrats	36 (13.5%)
Fianna Fáil	20 (7.5%)
Other	14 (5.2%)
Green Party	13 (4.9%)
Labour Party	8 (3.0%)
People Before Profit- Solidarity	8 (3.0%)
Aontú	1 (0.4%)

Notes. Those who indicated *Other* regarding their political affiliation indicated they were undecided (7), none (2), would not vote (1), and one specified the Irish Freedom Party.

3.2. One-way ANOVA results guiding choice of moderator and covariate variables.

The results of a one-way ANOVA indicated a lack of independence between the experimental condition and participants' agreement with the information, $F(1, 266) = 10.03$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = .04$. Participants in the high economic threat condition were more likely to believe the information ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.23$) compared to participants in the low economic threat condition ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.52$). Given the potential for spurious treatment effects, and interpretation issues associated with ANCOVA when a covariate and experimental effect lack independence (Field, 2018; Miller & Chapman, 2001), we conducted regression analysis treating agreement with the manipulated information as a potential moderator on all effects of the economic threat condition on outcome variables.

Perceptions of Brexit threat did not differ according to political affiliation, $F(1, 266) = 2.26, p = .134, \eta^2p = .01$. Allowing for its selection as a covariate.

3.3. Summary of exploratory factor analysis for the Civic nationalism and Ethnic nationalism scale

We conducted a principle axis factor analysis on the 13 items with oblique rotation (direct oblimin). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure affirmed the sampling adequacy for the analysis, $KMO = 0.86$ (Kaiser & Rice, 1974). The analysis yielded a two-factor solution (factor one eigenvalue = 4.66, factor two eigenvalue = 2.01), collectively explaining 51.34% of the variance. Seven items loaded onto factor 1, and five items loaded onto factor 2, with all factor loadings surpassing the recommended 0.4 level (Stevens, 2002). One item was excluded for failing to meet the 0.4 threshold. This item asked participants how important it is “To be a Catholic” for being truly Irish. Upon inspection, factor 1 represented more inclusive and permeable civic ideas of Irish identity, whereas factor 2 included items that reflected more ethnic and exclusive conceptions of Irishness. Notably, items pertaining to Irish culture, like traditional music and history, often seen as markers of ethnic nationalism, loaded onto the civic nationalism factor (factor one). This could be due to the questions emphasising these as voluntary interests, aligning with civic nationalism’s more inclusive basis. Conversely, the item “to have Irish citizenship (passport),” usually a civic nationalist marker, loaded onto ethnic nationalism (factor two). This suggests that, despite its civic nature, obtaining Irish citizenship may involve more barriers and be more exclusive than engaging in Irish traditions.

3.4. Factor Loadings

Item	Rotated Factor Loadings	
	Ethnic	
	Civic Nationalism (Factor 1)	Nationalism (Factor 2)
To be community minded (interested in political issues and voluntary work)	0.77	0.18
To be interested in Irish traditions (e.g., traditional music & dance, literature)	0.65	-0.16
To be interested in An Ghaeilge	0.63	-0.11
To look after others	0.63	0.22
To be interested in the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)	0.54	-0.22
Have a sense of Irish history	0.5	-0.26
To be outgoing	0.46	-0.17
To be a Catholic	0.36	-0.34
To have been born in Ireland	-0.1	-0.83
To have Irish ancestry	0.03	-0.74
To have lived in Ireland for most of one's life	0.01	-0.63
To be White	0.05	-0.56
To have Irish citizenship (passport)	0.07	-0.55
Eigenvalues	4.66	2.01
% of variance	35.86	15.48

Note Factor loading over .40 appear in bold.

3.5. Questionnaire on Ethnic and Civic Nationalism (Minescu , n.d.)

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY IRISHNESS

You may find that you agree with some of the below statements, and disagree with others, to varying extents.

Some people say the following things are important for being truly Irish Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is?	In your personal opinion					For your parents' generation				
	not important		↔	important	very	not important		↔	important	very
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
To be Catholic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To be interested in An Ghaeilge	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To have been born in Ireland	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To be outgoing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To have Irish Ancestry	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To have lived in Ireland for most of one's life	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To be White	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To be interested in Irish traditions (e.g. traditional music & dance, literature)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To look after others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To be interested in the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has have a sense of Irish history	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To have Irish Citizenship (Passport)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To be community minded (interested in political issues and voluntary work)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Deviations					
#	Details		Original Wording	Deviation Description	Reader Impact
1	Type	Analysis	<p><i>“If there is shared variance among all the dependent variables (DVs), we will conduct a MANOVA test. This analysis aims to assess the impact of the perceived economic threat of Brexit on the related DVs... If there is no shared variance between the DVs (against our expectations), we will run a series of ANOVAs with Bonferroni correction applied.”</i></p>	<p>Following the inclusion of the variable “agreement with information” into the analysis (see below), we decided to test for its potential moderating effect of the experimental conditions on the outcome variables. Furthermore, preliminary analyses indicated that this variable was not suitable as a covariate. As such, a moderation analysis was required to test the potential interaction effect of participants’ agreement with the information and the experimental conditions.</p>	<p>This deviation should not significantly affect the readers’ interpretation of the study or its results. The moderation analysis provides valuable insights into how pre-existing beliefs about Brexit interact with the economic threat conditions.</p>
	Reason	Plan not possible			
	Timing	After data access			
2	Type	Sample	<p><i>“The estimated sample size computed by G*Power, with an alpha value of 0.5 and 80% power to detect medium effects, stated 244 participants are required.”</i></p>	<p>Due to a change in the type of analysis, the estimated sample size requirements changed. For a post-hoc power analysis, the estimated sample size required was 263 participants for an alpha value of .05 and 80% power to detect medium size effects.</p>	<p>Since the actual sample size in our study exceeded 263 participants, this change should not affect the interpretation of the study or its results. The larger sample size ensures that the study has sufficient power to detect the effects.</p>
	Reason	Other (Please Explain)			
	Timing	Select One			
3	Type	Select One			
	Reason	Select One			
	Timing	Select One			
Unregistered Steps					
#	Details		Original Wording	Unregistered Step	Reader Impact

			Description	
1	Type	Variables	Political allegiance (covariate) and Agreement with Information (moderator) were not included in the Pre-registration document	Despite this omission, these variables were included in the study based on theoretical grounds outlined in the introduction.
	Timing	Before data collection		
2	Type	Hypotheses	The pre-registration did not include a hypothesis for the moderation effect.	<p>Following the advice of the third author, the first author included a measure in the questionnaire regarding participants' level of agreement with the experimental manipulation to account for pre-existing perspectives about Brexit. However, the first author did not pre-register a hypothesis for the potential moderating effect of this variable, contrary to the third author's expectations. Therefore, this was an oversight by the first author.</p> <p>While the moderation effects were not pre-registered, we have clearly stated this in our introduction:</p> <p><i>"We expected that pre-existing beliefs about Brexit, as measured by the level of agreement with the information presented during the experimental manipulation, would moderate all of these effects. Note, the intended moderation effects were not pre-registered, for more details see Appendix 3."</i></p> <p>Nevertheless, our inclusion of this variable and the related hypotheses are grounded in theoretical work.</p>
	Timing	After data access		
3	Type	Select One		
	Timing	Select One		

3.7. Brexit High Economic Threat Manipulation

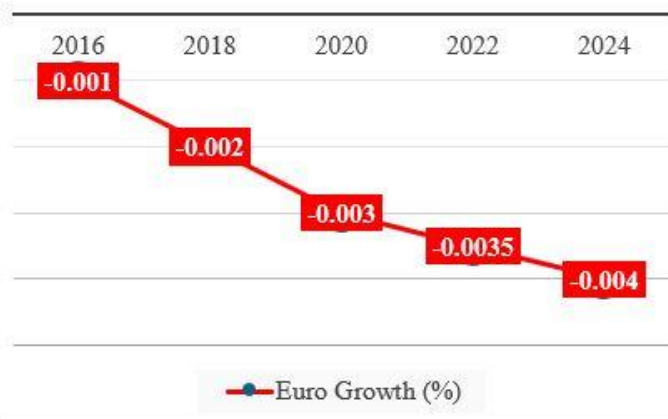
THE IRISH TIMES

The Damaging Economic Impact of Brexit

Professor O'Connor, an expert in politics and economics at Trinity College, published a research article examining the economic impact of Brexit.

The report emphasised that Britain's unexpected exit from the European Union has negatively impacted the Republic of Ireland's economy, even with arrangements such as Northern Ireland's 'special status'. Even amidst global instability, Brexit is identified as a key contributor to the Republic of Ireland's most significant energy price surge in decades, escalating fuel costs and food prices.

The Economic Impact of Brexit on the Republic of Ireland



■ Graph taken from the *Journal of Political Economy* January 2024

The economic instability following Brexit is expected to continue, putting pressure on household incomes and businesses. With the current arrangements, the Republic of Ireland is expected to endure a significant economic impact from Brexit.

3.8. Brexit Low Economic Threat Manipulation

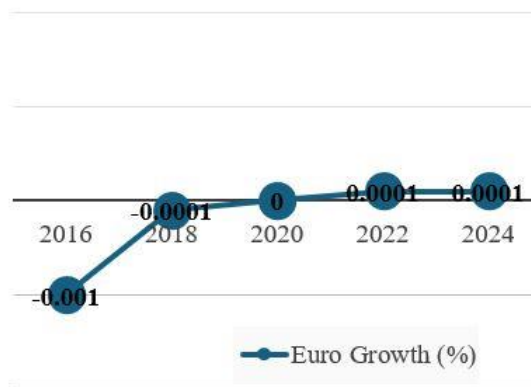
THE IRISH TIMES

The Economic Impact of Brexit?

Professor O'Connor, an expert in politics and economics at Trinity College, published a research article examining the economic impact of Brexit.

The findings of the article indicate that Brexit is not a significant threat to the Republic of Ireland's economy and cost-of-living. The report emphasised that Britain's unexpected exit from the European Union has not negatively impacted the Republic of Ireland's economy, especially with arrangements such as Northern Ireland's 'special status'.

The Economic Impact of Brexit on the Republic of Ireland



■ Graph taken from the Journal of Political Economy January 2024

Despite some economic instability following Brexit, with the current arrangements, the Republic of Ireland is not expected to endure a significant economic impact from Brexit.

3.9. Questionnaire

Support for a United Ireland

For each of the following options, please indicate the extent to which you would be opposed or in favour, using this 1 to 7 scale, where '1' means you are strongly opposed and '7' means you are strongly in favour.

1= Strongly Opposed to 7 = Strongly in favour

- Northern Ireland to stay in the United Kingdom
- Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom and reunify with the Republic of Ireland

Manipulation Check Perceived Brexit Economic Threat

1= Not at all to 7 = To a great extent

- To what extent does Brexit present an economic threat to the Republic of Ireland?
- To what extent does Brexit benefit the Republic of Ireland economically?
- To what extent does Brexit harm economy and businesses in the Republic of Ireland?

National Identification

Please indicate the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following statements.

1= Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree

- I identify with Irish people
- I feel committed to Irish people
- I am glad to be Irish
- Being Irish is an important part of how I see myself.

Ethnic and Civic Nationalism

Some say that the following things are important for being truly Irish. Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is?

1= Not important at all to 7 = very important

- To be a Catholic
- To be interested in An Ghaeilge
- To have been born in Ireland
- To have Irish ancestry

- To be White
- To be interested in Irish traditions (e.g., traditional music & dance, literature)
- To be interested in the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)
- Have a sense of Irish history
- To be outgoing
- To have lived in Ireland for most of one's life
- To look after others
- To have Irish citizenship (passport)
- To be community minded (interested in political issues and voluntary work)

Demographics

How old are you?

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer not to say

If the general election was tomorrow which party or independent candidate, do you think you would give your first preference vote to?

Sinn Féin

Fine Gael

Fianna Fáil

Independents

Social Democrats

Green Party

Labour Party

People Before Profit- Solidarity

Aontú

Other _____

Agreement with Information

1= Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree

How much do you disagree or agree with what Prof. O'Connor stated about Brexit and the newspaper article you read at the beginning of this survey?