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**ARTICLE**

# Citizens apart? Representing post-Brexit youth politics in the UK media

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**Abstract**

In 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union (EU). This outcome was not only unexpected but also had clear geographical and age-bound divisions. While people over the age of 65 tended to vote to leave, younger voters were more likely to vote to remain a part of the EU. Reflecting on 7 years of journalism, this paper explores the ways in which young people have been represented by the news media with regards to the issue of Brexit. It analyses a database of 700 news media articles published from 2016 to 2022 across the UK, equating to 100 articles per calendar year and ranging from regional sources to those with an international reach. The paper showcases how young people occupy liminal spaces within the news media through an analysis of the language used to describe their political participation, and a focus on their role within political activism. As it is this media that dominates hegemonic narratives within traditional political spheres, the retelling and representation of young people's engagement serves, we argue, to reinforce their liminality as citizens apart.

**KEYWORDS**

Brexit, liminality, political participation, UK, young people

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the days following the 2016 Brexit Referendum, the Chair of the British Youth Council, Jon Foster, sent a letter to the Cabinet Office asking that young people be present in any future negotiations to oversee the United Kingdom's (UK) transition from the European Union (EU). 'What happens next', he noted, 'is still about our future too' (Foster, 2016). The British Youth Council suggested that young people under the age of 18 had been sidelined. Too young to vote, their views were, as the Council argued, largely disregarded and absent from the fractious public discourse, much of which was mediated, influenced and represented by the media that accompanied Brexit. Questions of representation, belonging and the meaning of place were not only omnipresent in the years predating the vote in 2016, but have become embedded in much of the discourse and decision-making that has followed.

Arguably, Brexit began a process of reimagining the UK, both in terms of the future of Northern Ireland (Hayward & Komarova, 2022), but also of the growing likelihood of a future independent Scotland, and its possible accession to the EU (Hayward et al., 2022). From the outset, the outcome caused widespread disruption. Initially, the Referendum

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result came as a surprise to many; opinion polls were unable to call the result even in the days leading up to the vote (Arnorsson & Zoega, 2018). Of particular importance for this paper is the need to recognise that there were divisions along voter age. The Leave Campaign managed to galvanise middle-aged and older men and women, across class-based boundaries, with 60% of those aged 65 and over voting leave. The reverse was the case for younger voters, of whom 62% voted to remain (Virdee & McGeever, 2018). This has led to some speculation that a higher turnout among this cohort may have led to a different result overall (Becker et al., 2017). Moreover, the transition into Brexit took 3 years—and continues to unfold in legal, social and political contexts—meaning there are significant temporal implications for those who were under the age of 18 in 2016 and therefore unable to vote, who are now experiencing Brexit as young adults.

Central to this, we feel, is a need to understand the role of the media in reinforcing and encouraging shifts in public attitudes which were central to the Brexit campaign (Gavin, 2018), and has played an important role afterwards as the Brexit process has unfolded. As Dempsey and McDowell (2019) note, the news media continues to shape how the public understands and consumes events. However, young people's literacy of this particular form of media is low (Swart, 2021), and so they are divorced from these discussions and the wider agendas that they set. Figures show that only 16% of young people aged 16–24 years consume traditional print news media compared with 50% over the age of 65 (Statista, 2022). The focus of this paper is to consider how this disengagement with traditional news media reinforces the idea of young people as 'citizens apart' or 'not-quite-citizens', and how news media represents youth identities to other generational groups. It examines how young people in the UK and their political engagement are constructed and represented by the news media in relation to Brexit, drawing on an analysis of a database of 700 news media sources. The sources were published between 2016 and 2022 and focus on the relationship between young people and the EU Referendum of 2016.

Building upon this, we contend that a complex reading of youth politics is required to ascertain how young people and their political selves are constructed through the news media. In so doing, it is important to draw attention to how young people can simultaneously engage in capital 'P' Politics and lower case 'p' politics and go beyond this binary and create something politically new and progressive (Skelton, 2010). Henn and Foard (2014) noted that young people are often viewed as politically apathetic, but contended that this is too simplistic a narrative. Their work suggested that young people had an appreciation for the political process but felt that it was unable to affect real change due to the dominance of the traditional political elite, and so preferred alternative forms of political activism. However, as traditional politics is aligned closely to the mainstream news media, it often reinforces narratives surrounding young people's positionality as citizens-in-training, rather than fully fledged citizens in their own right (Mills, 2013).

This ongoing narrative is problematic as it puts young people firmly within a liminal position regarding political autonomy, but due to their illiteracy with the news media (Swart, 2021) they have little opportunity to influence this narrative. We argue that this could serve to reinforce wider disenfranchisement with traditional politics. From a geographical perspective, liminality refers to transitional practices whereby groups or individuals occupy positions at the margins of a threshold (Beckwith et al., 2022; Wood, 2012, 2016). Such socio-temporal environments can be referred to as 'in-between' or 'betwixt' spaces, and has been used to frame and position young people through particular social, political and legal frameworks, such as voting ages (Skelton, 2010). Wood (2012, p. 338, emphasis in original) argues that while such liminality can be seen to marginalise young people as 'neither completely "child", nor completely "adult"', there is value in interrogating liminal spaces to explore if and how youth agency can, in some ways, resist and subvert the negative connotations associated with notions of social and political apathy often associated with this period of the life-course (Skelton, 2010). Therefore, we proceed with three ways of considering young people's liminality. First, we consider liminality as a material, psychological or symbolic limit, barrier or threshold; next, we understand liminality to be an embodied state of being—to 'be', 'act' or 'think' in liminal ways; and finally, liminality as an apparatus of social positioning—to impose barriers or limits on to others.

Our focus on the period from the build up to the EU Referendum in 2016 to the 'post-Brexit' landscape of 2022 is important. This period is, in itself, liminal, in that the transitional process of leaving the EU has, and still remains, complex, contested and in flux. Hence, our archival approach, while limited in its capacity to provide a detailed account of the actual youth politics on the ground, offers critical insight into the ways in which space and place are entangled in young people's political actions and how they are discussed within the hegemonic discourses driven by the news media. Our research, therefore, poses two specific research questions from which to proceed. How are young people's liminal positions reinforced by the language used in media reports? How does reportage of youth politics represent young people's political activism and/or apathy? Following a literature review of young people's political geographies and some further methodological elaboration, our paper outlines these two key areas in which young people are made to occupy liminal spaces.

## 2 | THE POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The marginal place of young people within political-legal structures and institutional practices has limited discussions of the political role they play in society. Given that political status (e.g., the right to vote) is a marker of adulthood, young people are at best portrayed as ‘citizen[s]-in-the-making’ (Marshall, 1950, p. 25). At worst, they are described as ‘needing to learn how to be citizens in the future’ (Mills, 2013, p. 122; see also Lawy & Biesta, 2006). As Skelton (2010) argues, such framings are closely related to capital ‘P’ Politics rather than lower case ‘p’ politics. Within political geography, the former is concerned with the state, nations, geopolitics, legal structures such as citizenship and is therefore considered as formal, public, institutional or macro-politics. In contrast, the latter relates to participation and engagement, and is understood as informal, personal and micro-politics. Drawing on the case of Monserratian youth debating the electoral franchise, Skelton goes on further to describe how young people’s legal-political ‘in-betweenness’ enables them to simultaneously occupy two *Political/political* spaces and blend and meld both types of politics. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that young people show competence in political processes and take political actions, not just through formal organisations or institutional bodies representing a generalised public interest, but through informal, individualised and everyday activities (see, for example, Harris et al., 2010; Jeffrey, 2013).

Studies have explored young people’s political participation at various sites and scales. In their study of young people in Bradford, UK and their attitudes towards the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq based on the interpretation of editorial cartoons from British broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, Horschelmann and Refaie (2014, p. 446) have demonstrated that young people engage in ‘more-than-local politics’ by relating their everyday lives to the lives of strangers and selves without (see also Massey, 2004). They contended that this is made possible through different forms of territorial attachments and participation in multiple communities. Similarly, Finlay and Hopkins (2020) have illustrated how the exposure to Islamophobia through global (e.g., the rhetoric and policies about Muslims around the US presidential elections in 2016) and UK politics (e.g., the Prevent<sup>1</sup> strategy) affects the local lives of Muslim youth in Scotland and their political engagement. They have illustrated how space is central to young Muslims’ political participation of resistance, as manifested by their attempts to orient themselves to more public and visible spaces. Alongside this, Benwell’s (2016) work on young people living in the Falkland Islands has highlighted the role of memory in young people’s geopolitical subjectivities. Specifically, he has contended that emotions and memories related to past geopolitical events are reproduced and/or reworked by the assemblage of socio-spatial practices; that is, young people’s interaction with adults and the everyday spaces. These accounts underline how space, place and scale are entangled in young people’s engagement with geopolitics, pointing towards the complexity, spontaneity and mutability of youth politics in practice (Jeffrey, 2013).

Work on the political geographies of young people has also shown that their agency takes different forms, but as our analysis will show, this is often not reflected in news media. Young people demonstrate their resourcefulness in response to multiple structures of dominance, such as neoliberal economic change and governmental disciplinary regimes. However, as Jeffrey (2010b) suggested, their ability to mobilise resources features strongly at ‘vital conjunctures’, wherein the particular and temporary configuration of structures in specific situations create new frustrations yet open possibilities for intervention. For instance, in their research on Chinese international students returning to their home country during the COVID-19 pandemic, He and Zhang (2023) have shown that they were often subject to harsh remarks and hateful speech on the internet because of the potential health risks and socio-economic burden they may bring to China where zero COVID-19 policies were implemented. As a response, their research participants created a hybrid space using a mobile media platform to witness and elicit empathy for hardship and precarity they experience on their journey back home.

Nevertheless, scholars have emphasised that while young people as political actors can articulate what Massey (2005) calls a ‘progressive politics’, their strategies and practices are often reactionary and tend to sustain established power structures. For instance, Jeffrey (2010a) has documented the strategies through which unemployed young men from various castes and classes in India engage in waiting and pass surplus time in ways that reproduce social (dis)advantage. In other words, their agency may be limited and made ineffective by existing power hierarchies, which is in stark contrast to calls for young people’s political participation towards societal changes. Likewise, Henn and Foard (2014) state that it would be erroneous to suggest young people are apolitical, but rather that they tend to express their politics in ways which operate beyond traditional political spheres. The ‘youthquake’ of the 2017 General Election in the UK evidenced this through a higher-than-expected turnout of young people (who tended to vote for the Labour Party). Sloam et al. (2018) contend that this was partly how the Labour Party chose to galvanise those voters through social media strategies, left-leaning online news channels outside of the traditional news media, and celebrity endorsements. Through

their liminal positionings, young people are, therefore, politically engaged, but issues arise when there is a disconnection between traditional Politics, and young people's political voices.

Linking into the agentic affordances of liminality discussed earlier, this work emphasises that young people can simultaneously have a respect for democracy, but be discontent with how this is translated into actual societal change, and tend to be suspicious of elected politicians and representatives. Through their liminal positionings, young people are, therefore, politically engaged, but issues arise when there is a disconnection between traditional Politics, and young people's political voices. This paper reflects this liminality through an analysis of young people's politics according to the mainstream news media. This is of importance because it is these media which reflect dominant public discourse and mainstream views—as outlined below.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on an online archival discourse analysis of news articles from 2016 to 2022, with a view to understanding how news media represents young people's political engagement, and youth as a particular set of (a)political discourses. It is important to note, that the term 'news media' covers traditional print media, but also its reproduction online, in digital formats and across social networks. Taking an inductive approach, we explored the way in which young people in the UK were framed by the media in relation to Brexit debates.

The ability of the media to shape and frame our understanding has long been the subject of academic debate (see Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Klapper, 1960; Van Dijk, 1995). Media representation of salient events or issues are often central to how we engage in and navigate public discourse. Despite the rise in new forms of media, it remains an important tool for fomenting ideological positions and establishing hegemonic debates. These representations are critically important in mediating perceptions of people, places and ideas. Van Dijk's (1995) seminal research on the discursive influence of the media on public opinion has explored the relationship between communication, power and manipulation, pointing to the persuasive nature of media consumption. Valenzuela and McCombs (2019) suggest that the news media, in signalling the importance (or unimportance) of particular topics, sets the political agenda and this largely becomes the public's agenda. It is important to acknowledge that although news literacy varies widely and modes of consumption differ particularly among younger users (see Fleming, 2014), the news media remain influential in producing and reproducing hegemonic ideological imaginings and social values, feeding into the 'cultural production of knowledge' (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017, p. 220). This can often lead to the misrepresentation and stereotyping of minority groups (see for example Kabir, 2010), or as this study suggests, in propagating specific ideas about young people's agency. Multiple scholars equate news literacy with 'civic literacy', suggesting that engaging with the news was indeed a 'prerequisite for democratic participation' (Swart, 2021, p. 507).

The data for the paper were collated through an examination of newspaper articles (which are available in print, online and across social media platforms), as they remain influential in setting the news agenda (Brooks, 2017). Swart's (2021, p. 503) study of news literacy among young people found that while newspaper-reading was virtually 'non-existent' in her (small) cohort of 16–22-year-olds many consumed news media 'incidentally' through networks, family and algorithms. This is significant: if we accept that traditional news media 'largely sets the public agenda' and that news literacy is a form of civic literacy, if young people do not consume these hegemonic media sources, they are free to represent them however they wish.

The Nexis database, an online research and news media database, was used to identify and retrieve articles which met the following criteria: published between 2016 and 2022, written in English, and with a geographical focus of the United Kingdom. The keywords 'Brexit' and 'Young people' were employed to narrow down our search. In total, 700 articles (a sample of 100 articles per year) were imported into Microsoft Excel and classified by scale (i.e., local, regional, national) and political leaning. The articles in question comprised primarily news articles with a smaller sample of reflections from columnists; they did not include letters written to the editors. As a consequence, they represent a range of different voices at work here: those of the journalists themselves who write in support of the political leaning of their employers, other columnists who perhaps have greater freedom of self-expression, and occasionally young people themselves as interviewees or guest contributors. The implications of these diverse voices are elaborated upon within the analysis.

The articles were coded thematically using both inductive and deductive methods. Codes were derived from a content analysis of articles and informed by extant literature on young people's political engagement and participation. These data point towards two broad issues: how young people's liminal position is reinforced by both the

language used, and the reportage on their political activism. Considering that existing scholarly work on the political geographies of young people is primarily based on empirical research (see, for example, Benwell, 2016; Finlay & Hopkins, 2020; Hörschelmann & Refaie, 2014; Maira, 2004), we believe that archival research makes an important contribution to the field by allowing us to trace changing representations of youth agency in relation to geopolitical events over time.

## 4 | A MEDIA LENS ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

### 4.1 | Language and its role in young people's liminalities

The liminal positioning of youth in political-legal structures and institutional practices is represented in the language used in the newspaper articles to describe young people and their political participation. For instance, they are often described as demanding, emotional and immature. The following extracts are typical:

Young people must stop being so demanding; Instead of sniping from the sidelines they should take some responsibility for bringing about the changes they desire.

(*The Times*, 31 October 2016)

Young people? A bunch of easily offended snowflakes who bang on about how badly done to they are while buying £5 cups of fancy coffee and having the sort of lifestyle that their forebears could only dream of.

(*The Journal*, 3 November 2017)

It is interesting to note that the construction of young people tends to be homogenised, despite the recognition of socio-economic and regional differences in their stance towards Brexit. Obscuring the differences in political perspectives among young people may be explained by 'deliberative, political processes for the purpose of building consensus', as those differences make it problematic to generalise about and represent youth interests (Hörschelmann & Refaie, 2014, p. 445).

Similarly, their engagement with politics is not taken for granted; instead, the representations suggest that their political participation *needs* to be encouraged. Furthermore, it would be erroneous to assume that all sources offered negative perspectives of young people with the following two articles supporting youth voices. *The Guardian* offered a critical perspective on how political parties themselves represent young people, reflecting on an EU Remain campaign video targeting youth was not only out of touch but also patronising towards young voters:

Targeted at young voters, a video set to pounding house music flashes up the words 'workin, ravin, chattin, roamin' before asking viewers to vote in. The video avoids any mention of politics, recognisable politicians or logos from the remain campaign or political parties, instead featuring wine glasses, strobe lights and sky-diving, before the slogan: 'Life's better in the EU'.

(*The Guardian*, 28 June 2016)

Perhaps recognising disaffection with traditional politics among young people (Henn & Foard, 2014), *The Guardian's* position is that this is taken too far by the Remain campaign video in question. Similar attitudes are emphasised by work which suggests that young people are often treated as needing to learn how to be active citizens (Lawy & Biesta, 2006; Mills, 2013). Mills (2013) highlights that this is reflective of 'many state-level approaches to youth and ... wider discourses about how to deal with young people' (p. 122; emphasis in original).

Furthermore, the arguments about young people being immature or selfish are made in relation to their reactions to the decision to leave the EU. The articles often perceive that young people blame older generations for this outcome. *The Independent*, offering a rare youth perspective, states:

Statistically, older generations have voted against us and now we will be punished for their lack of solidarity. Our cause is simple; it is not an ideological one—we just want a good chance of getting a job after graduation. We were voting for the future, and the older generations who dragged us into Brexit were voting for a rose-tinted view of the past.

(*The Independent*, 16 January 2017)

The outcome of this is a perceived generational divide between ‘[older] possessors’ and ‘a younger, dispossessed generation’ (*The Irish Times*, 29 October 2022). While young people may have much less social and economic opportunities post-Brexit, as evidenced in the discontinuation of the Erasmus programme across the UK, this ‘battle between young and old’ (again) tends to mask differences between young people themselves and their political leanings.

Alongside this, the news media articles seem to suggest a lack of resilience among young people and pessimism about the future. As the following comments demonstrate, they are represented by the articles as vulnerable compared with older people:

The impact of the 2008 recession, the climate emergency, Brexit and now the COVID-19 pandemic—these have all had an impact on children and young people’s lives and can contribute to a feeling of pessimism and lack of control about the future.

(*Daily Mirror*, 28 November 2020)

Sixty-nine per cent of 16–24s feel pessimistic about the impact of Brexit on young people; 82 per cent feel the same about the impacts of COVID-19 ... This pessimism may explain why mental health is the top issue for young people.

(*The Sunday Times*, 19 September 2021).

Here the terms children and young people are used interchangeably, echoing ideas about young people as ‘not-quite-citizens’—that is, ‘a status that is achieved only after one has traversed a particular developmental and educational trajectory’ (Lawy & Biesta, 2006, p. 42; see also Skelton, 2010). Overall, this view of young people, and the language the articles use to describe them, are problematic, as it suggests young people can often find external pressures overwhelming, perhaps more so than older generations. This might have implications for active and responsible citizenship.

## 4.2 | Reporting young people’s political activism and engagement

These are, of course, essentialist representations of age that are, in many ways, utilised as mechanisms to classify or ‘fix’ age groups as oppositional forces. In aligning with the more agentic dimensions of liminality, we draw upon discourses that resist reductive age classifications (Barron, 2021) to argue for liminality as a productive space for youth political action. Contrary to the dominant framing of youth as such, the articles discuss, and therefore offer representations of, the various ways in which young people engage in political activism and express agency. For instance, *i-Independent* reports young people under 30 leading a nationwide campaign called ‘Undivided’ to unite their peers in the UK across the political spectrum and in so doing ‘fight for young people’s interests and secure the best possible Brexit deal for [them]’ (27 October 2016). This is noteworthy given that the Brexit vote is largely framed as being divided between people who voted to leave and those who voted to remain. Similarly, young people’s resourcefulness (in response to the depressed economic environment following the Brexit referendum in 2016) is also demonstrated in a high youth voter turnout in the General Election in 2017, which is dubbed as ‘revenge of the youth’ (*Daily Mirror*, 9 June 2017) and ‘youthquake’ (*Evening Standard*, 15 December 2017). *The University Times: Trinity College* elaborates in detail the significance of young voters in the general election result:

These young people turned out in the UK last week. Queues outside of polling stations in university towns helped swing key seats, resulting in a major political upset and giving Labour its biggest vote share increase since 1954. The turnout of young people is estimated at 72 per cent, compared to an overall turnout of just under 70 per cent. Headlines around the world, from the Guardian to the Mirror to the New York Times, are claiming that the youth vote is what changed this election, and perhaps the future of Brexit and UK—and maybe even European—politics as a result.

(*The University Times: Trinity College*, 11 June 2017)

The 2017 General Election in the UK illustrates the nuance of young people’s political engagements. It reflects that these damaging narratives around disenfranchised youth, who are framed as unable or unwilling to make political engagements, does not reflect the lived reality of many young people.

With the heightened awareness of the importance of young people’s political engagement and participation, a number of articles published in 2018/19 highlight a notable increase in student campaigns/movements and their power/voices to

influence Brexit debates and politics in general. This is also in part due to a growing call for the second referendum in 2018 and major political events such as the European Parliament election and General election in 2019. The politicisation of young people leads to the creation of new (political) spaces for young people, as 'space is fundamental in any exercise of power' (Foucault, 1991, p. 252). Hence, we might infer that the liminalities associated with youth mean occupying socio-political space that is less 'fixed' and more 'transformative'—that is, a transitional space through which new political, social and cultural ways of thinking and acting can be explored that resists and contests traditional structures (Skeggs, 2004; Wood, 2016). Reflecting this, several newspaper articles reflected on representations of student-led organisations, such as 'Our Future Our Choice (OFOC)' and 'For our Future's Sake (FFS)', which launched campaigns for the second referendum or a People's Vote:

The campaign 'For our Future's Sake' was created by students and young people, who have passed the point of frustration with the Government's complete lack of progress or success with the Brexit negotiations, and the Labour Party's inability to oppose them. Brexit is the biggest threat facing future generations, and we believe that a People's Vote on the terms of the deal will show that this is not the future that young people want. The youth are revolting.

(*The Journal*, 22 May 2018)

Students and young people from across the U.K. on Tuesday travelled to London to lobby their MPs in parliament to support a second referendum or, as it is popularly known, a People's Vote ... The event was organized by the anti-Brexit and youth-led 'Our Future Our Choice' movement and saw over 100 students and young people travel to Westminster to demonstrate and request a meeting with their MP.

(*The Peninsula*, 27 November 2018)

Here young people deal with *Political* issues (e.g., the right to vote) through taking *political* actions (e.g., demonstration), articulating what Skelton (2010) has described as 'a melded and blended P/politics' (p. 150). Moreover, some articles describe how these anti-Brexit campaigns are launched on multiple scales. The following extracts show how the nationwide campaign organised by OFOC is taking place on *local* as well as *international* scales:

More than 200 pupils from four schools here [in Belfast] are expected to take part in a joint walkout at noon today to protest over the 'unwillingness of politicians in Westminster to address the grave concerns young people have' over the draft Brexit deal, according to organisers. The event is being co-ordinated by Our Future Our Choice NI (OFOC NI), a group of young people campaigning for a People's Vote<sup>2</sup> on the final Brexit deal. The walkout campaign has been branded #WalkForOurFuture, and will see events take place in each of the UK's four home nations today.

(*Belfast Telegraph*, 19 November 2018)

Anti-Brexit campaigners in Brussels have attempted to destroy mock copies of the Brexit divorce deal with blowtorches and sledgehammers. Wearing T-shirts that read: 'Those who have to live with Brexit don't want to,' members of Our Future Our Choice, a British pro-EU advocacy group for young people, took to the snowy streets of the Belgian capital to convey their displeasure with Britain's impending exit. A protester is using a blowtorch to set fire to the Brexit divorce deal, while another uses a giant hammer to destroy a massive cardboard version.

(*The Guardian*, 25 November 2018)

Crucially, these examples represent the distinctive characteristics of young people's political participation, which is through 'the cultivation of interdependencies rather than individual action and autonomy' (Jeffrey, 2012, p. 250). In other words, their participation of resistance is characterised by forming bonds with other young people *as well as* with older adults. Additionally, irreverence and mischief feature in these accounts, with young people conveying their displeasure with the UK's departure from the EU by organising the #WalkForOurFuture campaign and through setting fire to the Brexit divorce deal (made of a cardboard) and destroying it using a giant hammer. As Jeffrey (2012) has noted, the prominence of humour in young people's agency and political practices may be indicative of their proximity to early childhood. Liminality is represented as being experienced by young people in many different ways. It is associated with the stage of their life-course, but also experienced through collective action whether on a local, regional or international level. It is also represented symbolically through ways of knowing and being young political actors.



Importantly, while it is possible to create political spaces to enable the articulation of dissent with the state (e.g., OFOC and FFS), a key challenge is the creation of such spaces without entrenching antagonism between young people (Hörschelmann & Refaie, 2014). *Wigan Today*, for example, describes how existing political spaces are redefined by those backing Britain leaving the European Union, countering the popular narrative that all young people support Remain in the Brexit referendum:

I founded it [Students for Brexit on Twitter/@Brexit4Students] because I was sick of Remain groups like Our Future Our Choice telling me what I should want for my future. I wanted to spread the message that there are young people who support Leave and they are not backwards or isolationist. We are pushing a positive, global future for Britain, and I believe if we don't get our message out about, this opportunity will slip away. Our campaign outline is that if we can't get a deal by March 29 we leave with no deal. (*Wigan Today*, 8 February 2019)

Notably, the newspaper articles demonstrate the role played by social media in the process by which young people become politically engaged (Vromen et al., 2015; Xenos et al., 2014). *The Guardian* reports how youth political participation in the 2019 European Parliament Election was encouraged and promoted on social media and dating apps like Bumble and Grindr:

We [Young people] have till midnight tonight to register to vote. There have been extraordinary steps to get young people to do this. The Give a XXXX campaign, run by the non-partisan Vote For Your Future, spread on social media, university campuses and via Bumble and Grindr, has made strides. But the battle is on right up till midnight. (7 May 2019).

Also, while pointing to their strategic efforts to resist dominant forces and their resourcefulness in the context of constraints, this example shows how young people's political engagement is represented as less conventional and 'Do-It-Yourself' forms of engagement rather than solely relying on mainstream and institutional routes (Finlay & Hopkins, 2020).

Nevertheless, as Jeffrey (2012) has argued, forms of dominant power tend to characterise youth action and 'negative agency' (p. 249). In other words, the strategies that young people were represented as engaging in were often reactionary, sustaining and replenishing established power structures, reinforcing their liminal positionality. For instance, some of the newspaper articles which discuss various political parties pitching to young voters indicate that young people seemingly have more influences in political debates than before. However, concerns are expressed by the articles in terms of how young people are mobilised by politicians to support their own political agenda: 'Young people especially need to know that their futures aren't being weighed against political expediency' (*The Independent*, 20 July 2019). This is exemplified in a shift in Labour's Brexit policy, despite the significant role that young voters play in the party's biggest vote share increase in the General election in 2017 (*Daily Mail*, 18 January 2019).

Crucially, young people's political engagements are represented as frustrated by the way in which politicians perceive their participation of resistance in general, as *The Christian Science Monitor* aptly describes: 'You can have as many [demonstrations] as you want, but there's nothing that [young people] can do to influence Parliament' (13 December 2019). This is reflected in the articles written from 2020 onwards which show a notable absence and marginalisation of young people's political engagement, in contrast to those from 2016 to 2019. This could be, in part, due to a convergence of structural issues that have come to the fore during this timeframe that have added more ambiguity to the liminalities associated with youth discourses.

While it could be argued that these processes of (spatial) marginalisation produce and shape political resistance among young people as they attempt to reorient themselves from the margins into more public and visible spaces (Finlay & Hopkins, 2020), our analysis shows many media representations are problematic and often reductive. We contend that as these media remain influential in shaping widespread political agendas (Brooks, 2017), some young people's lack of visibility in this realm could lead to their voices being overshadowed (see Swart, 2021). This is irrespective of whether the news media reflects their position in a positive or negative light.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

By exploring how young people in the UK are framed and represented by media in relation to Brexit through an analysis of 700 articles published between 2016 and 2022, this paper has made three distinct contributions to the political geographies

of young people. First, it has provided an empirical example of the role that media plays in constructing young people as politically liminal subjects. While previous studies (largely based in the UK and the USA) have explored the influence of news media in young people and/or their political participation, the majority of these have focused on ethnic minority people (Brooks, 2017; Finlay & Hopkins, 2020; Maira, 2004). This research, by contrast, has examined the role of news media in representing young people in the UK as liminal subjects more generally. From the articles analysed here, we find that 'youth' as an identity marker is often used interchangeably with or alongside 'childhood' in relation to Brexit debates. Crucially, this is represented in such ways as to fix young people as apolitical, apathetic and oppositional to other demographic groups. This feeds into wider discourses of youth in society that young people are 'political subjects in-waiting' who need to be trained and educated to become fully fledged citizens (Skelton, 2010, p. 146; see also Lawy & Biesta, 2006). Young people are also stereotyped and stigmatised as either emotional, demanding, immature and selfish, or weak and vulnerable (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). This deficit framing of young people operates tactically to keep them apart from political elites or adults, (re)producing their liminal positions in political-legal structures and institutional practices. Also, despite differences in political stances between young people, their perspectives tend to be generalised in the media (i.e., voting remain), which functions as building consensus for political purposes (Hörschelmann & Refaie, 2014). Therefore, a focus on news media uncovers key workings of youth politics, demonstrating how the institutionalised form of power controls and brings about certain subjectivities and behaviours among young people.

Second, this article has expanded work on young people's political participation through archival research. Going beyond the emphasis in existing empirical work of youth politics in particular time and space (see, for example, Benwell, 2016; Finlay & Hopkins, 2020; Hörschelmann & Refaie, 2014), this research sheds light on the ambiguities associated with how and why the liminalities associated with youth transform temporally and socially. This emerged in this study through the changing dynamics of young people's engagement with Brexit over time (from marginalisation to resistance) and across multiple scales (from local to international). Specifically, the newspaper articles represent how the liminalities of youth present barriers. In the articles analysed, political participation is often limited by the institutional mechanism, such as a voting age or the voter ID bill; manipulated by politicians or older generation; and discouraged by the reduced social and economic opportunities. Yet, such liminal spaces are viewed in our analysis as productive and agential, with young people also demonstrating their resistance through a high voter turnout in major political events, the creation of new political space by student-led organisations campaigning for anti-/pro-Brexit, and the mobilisation of various resources like social media in the contexts of constraints. Therefore, we contend that this methodological approach offers a new way of understanding the liminal positionings of young people and their engagement as shifting, both positively and negatively, in times of geopolitical change.

Finally, this paper provides a critical perspective on the nature of young people's agency. On the one hand, the creation of new political spaces such as OFOC, FFS and Students For Brexit can be seen as a resource for young people exercising resistance. On the other hand, youth-led campaigns equally serve as a means through which they perpetuate dominant structures of power: these movements fall short of challenging the outcome of Brexit and do not play a part in shaping the direction of its negotiation. What appears to be occurring in these examples are different forms of rehierarchisation or 'negative agency' (Jeffrey, 2012, p. 249). However, it is important to note that young people's involvement in sustaining and replenishing existing power structures is not simply a consequence of replicating dominant narratives about young people and/or their political engagement. This is illustrated by young people's engagement with state or media discourses about their disenchantment with political structures to bolster voter registration, and the evidence of humour, irreverence and mischief in their participation of resistance. We suggest that this limitation and possibility of young people as political subjects has the potential to explore alternative ways of conceptualising geopolitics and political geographies.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Ulster University's Pure Portal at <http://doi.org/10.21251/a8dca22c-3b4b-48c9-8985-21237520b790>.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A UK government counter-terrorism strategy which aims to prevent young Muslims from being drawn into terrorist-related activities.

<sup>2</sup> People's Vote is a nationwide campaign group for a second referendum following the UK's Brexit vote to leave the EU.

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