From Disinformation to Disorder: The 2024 Riots and the Far-Right

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School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies

University of Bristol

Student Number: 2003528

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Unit: POLI31555

Supervisor: Dr Joe Lin

I declare that this research was approved by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group.

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Dedications

To my family,

Mum

Dad

Tilly

Sofia

Thank you for your unwavering and unconditional support in everything I do. This is for you.

In memory of Elsie Dot Stancombe, Alice da Silva Aguiar, and Bebe King.

Abstract

Although the 2024 riots, sparked by the Southport stabbings, are one of the most shocking events in recent British history, academic literature considering their causes remains limited. This dissertation frames the riots as a potential inflexion point in the strategic manipulation of narrative by the British far-right. It questions whether the events of 2024 mark an evolution in the far-right or instead reflect an opportunistic exploitation of long-standing grievances through new channels. The analysis is grounded in backlash politics theory, which guides the analysis through its three key components: a retrograde objective, the use of extraordinary tactics, and the threshold condition for mainstream discourse.

Taking a theory-driven qualitative methodology, the research uses discourse analysis of media reporting, social media content, and influential rhetoric surrounding the riots. It identifies long-standing socioeconomic conditions (socioeconomic marginalisation, cultural unease, and demographic insecurity) and the far right's weaponisation of a tragic incident as the key drivers.

The dissertation reveals how certain far-right actors strategically destabilised democratic norms and reoriented public discourse. The 2024 riots exemplify not a transformation but a continuation of long-standing far-right strategies, now adapted to modern technology. Crucially, they illustrate the durability of identity-based backlash politics and the ease with which such sentiments can be mobilised in digital societies.

Future research suggestions include ethnographic approaches or evaluating policy interventions to address the conditions that enable and cause such backlashes.

Word Count: 9910

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

- BBC – The British Broadcasting Corporation
- BNP – British National Party
- Brexit – The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union
- EDL – English Defence League
- FPTP – First-Past-The-Post
- Reform – Reform UK
- Tommy Robinson – The pseudonym or street name of Stephen Yaxley-Lennon
- UK – The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- UKIP – UK Independence Party
- X – X is the name of the social media platform previously known as Twitter.

List of Images

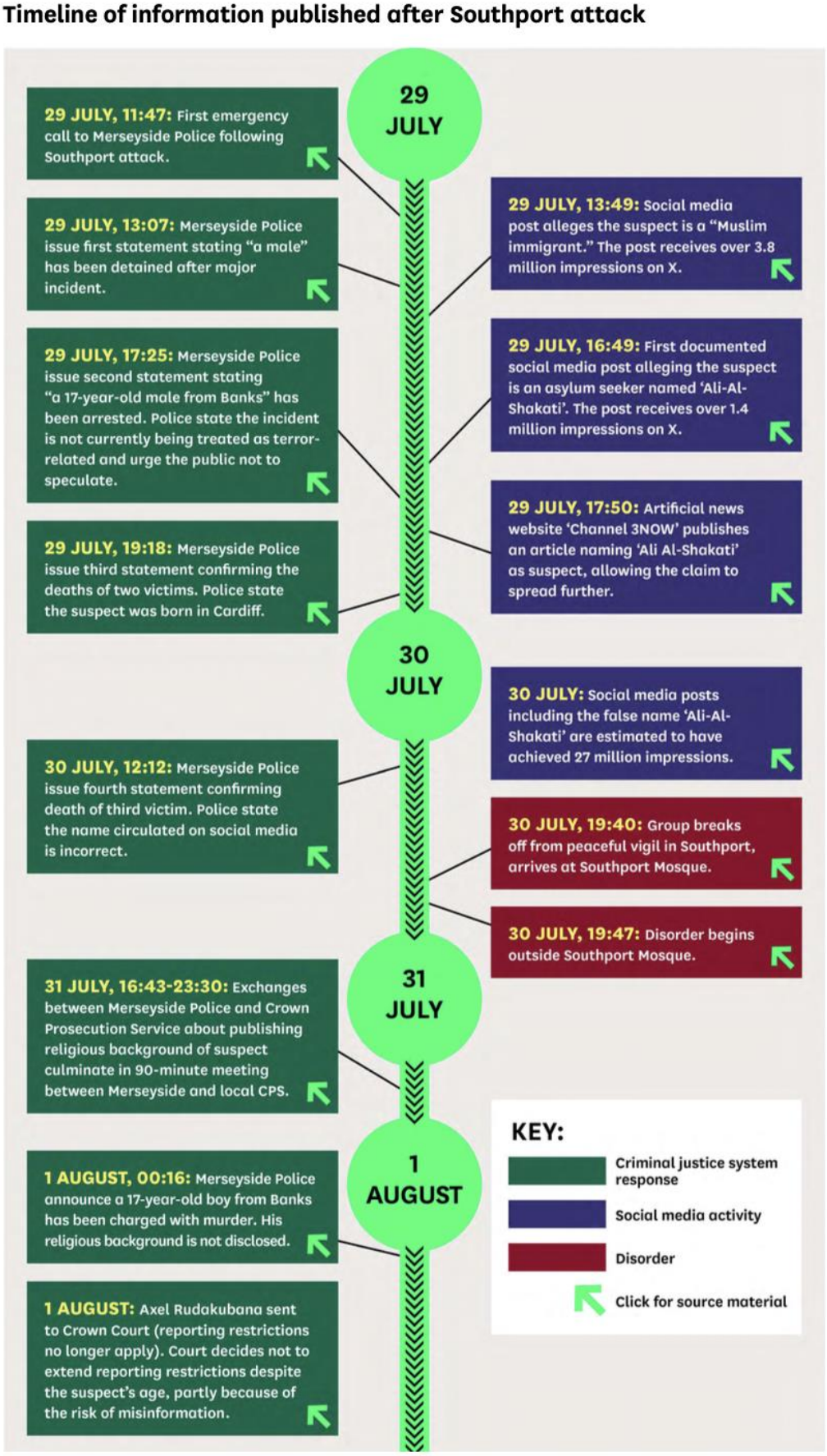

Figure 1. (Home Affairs Committee, 2024: 6)

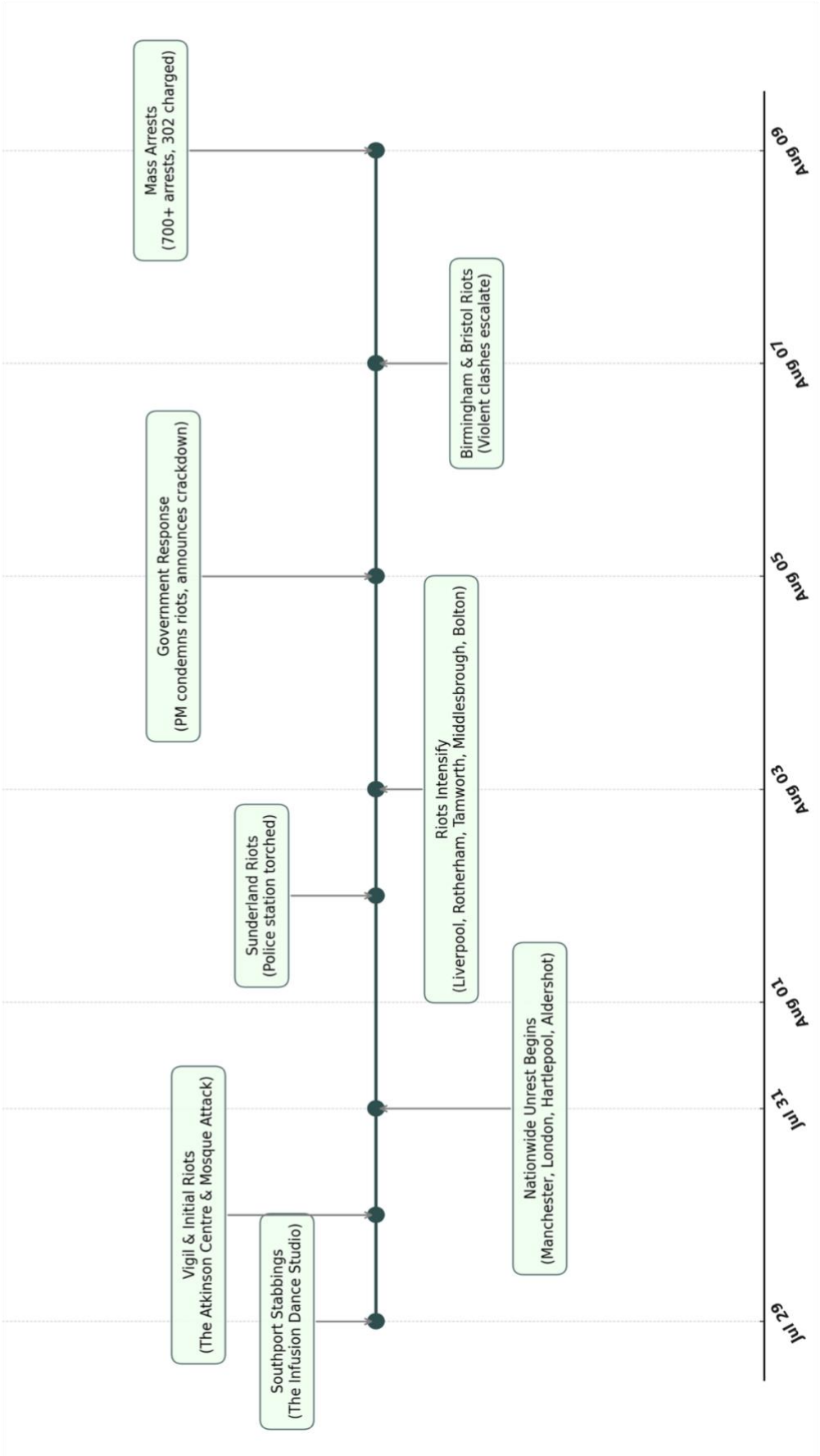

Figure 2: Timeline of the stabbing and riots

1. Introduction

On July 29, 2024, Axel Rudakubana carried out a brutal mass stabbing in Southport, murdering three children and attempting to murder numerous others at a Taylor Swift-themed dance class (Culley and Khalil, 2024). In the following week, an estimated 29 riots erupted across 27 British towns and cities (Downs, 2024). They have come to symbolise a turning point for the far-right in the United Kingdom (UK). The seemingly uncontrollable disorder that followed the attack was not, despite some reporting, merely a spontaneous eruption of anger but rather an event rooted in long-standing, complex political and societal shifts. At the heart of this phenomenon lies the interplay between disinformation, public perception, and the far-right's ability to capitalise on socio-political grievances. Disinformation is information intentionally disseminated to deceive, as opposed to misinformation, which is misleading but lacks the intent to deceive (Fallis, 2015: 402). This dissertation examines whether the 2024 riots were a turning point in the far-right's ability to manipulate narrative for political gain. This dissertation argues that while the 2024 riots introduced unprecedented digital tactics to far-right mobilisation, they ultimately served as an opportunistic outlet for long-brewing discontent rather than a comprehensive transformation of Britain's far-right.

The far-right is not new in UK politics, tracing back to groups such as the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s and, more recently, the British National Party (BNP) and the English Defence League (EDL). Such movements cyclically rise in response to social anxieties (Halperin, 2023). However, the scale and nature of the 2024 riots suggest something qualitatively different that this study will explore. The Southport stabbings

served as a catalyst for mass protests and riots, exacerbated by the rapid dissemination of disinformation across social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Telegram. Within hours of the attack, far-right actors manipulated narratives to frame the incident as representative of government failure, uncontrolled immigration, and the erosion of 'traditional' British identity, with some of the most prominent and highly viewed posts referring to the perpetrator as a Muslim illegal immigrant named 'Ali Al-Shakati.' The scale of the riots and the speed at which they mobilised and escalated were unprecedented in recent British history, with major cities and towns from Liverpool to Bristol experiencing large-scale violent clashes between far-right demonstrators, counter-protesters, and the police. Verified reports indicate that this led to over 1,280 arrests being made, extensive property damage, and instances of serious violence (Downs, 2024). The velocity at which these narratives spread and the extent to which they influenced public sentiment underscores the transformative power of social media in shaping political discourse and mobilisation of action to an extent not plausible before its presence in society. Despite the riots having new characteristics, this dissertation asserts that the riots were not an isolated reaction spurred solely out of anger at the attack (regardless of disinformation) but rather an expression of long-standing feelings of cultural and economic decline, a backlash. The further argument is that these riots show the new capabilities of the far-right, and understanding the reasons behind and practicality of the changes in the far-right's strategy and makeup may allow a greater insight into the future of democracy in the UK.

This research uses backlash politics as its theoretical framework to situate the study. Backlash politics refers to reactionary responses when groups attempt to restore a

previous social order after perceiving that change threatens their status or values (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Alter and Zürn, 2020a). It is characterised by retrograde objectives, extraordinary tactics that challenge dominant narratives and a threshold condition for entry to mainstream public discourse (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 566-568). This is particularly relevant for analysing how economic disenfranchisement, shifting social norms, and other significant socioeconomic changes have fostered resentment within certain pockets of society, making them increasingly receptive to far-right rhetoric and mobilisation. The riots can be understood as a backlash by such groups, seeking to reassert a threatened identity and resist societal transformation to reclaim nostalgic status. Backlash politics is used over populism as the theoretical framework because backlash politics captures the identity-driven grievances, nostalgic sentiment, and norm-breaking tactics (ibid.: 568-570) seen in the 2024 riots, which are dimensions that populism's elite-people framework fails to fully encompass. Using this theoretical framework allows this dissertation to uncover the underlying explanations behind the far-right's resurgence and the impact this has on British politics.

Methodologically, this dissertation adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on discourse analysis of media, political rhetoric, and online narratives. While some quantitative statistical context is used illustratively, the primary mode of analysis remains qualitative and theory-driven. From this, a key research question emerges: Do the 2024 riots signal an evolution in far-right strategy, reflecting a new digitally influenced era, or do they serve as merely an opportunistic outlet for long-standing grievances without fundamentally reflecting the political landscape?

This dissertation situates itself within the literature on backlash politics, disinformation, the far-right, and protests more broadly. The case of the 2024 riots is particularly informative when compared to international examples where protest movements have occurred. However, the British case remains distinct due to the constraints of the first-past-the-post electoral system, which has thus far limited the electoral success of the far-right (Becker, Fetzer and Novy, 2017: 605) but not necessarily their ideological penetration into mainstream politics (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 6).

This dissertation will first establish the backlash politics framework that underpins the analysis, providing a conceptual foundation for understanding the mechanisms driving far-right mobilisation. A literature review follows this, situating the study within existing academic literature on the far-right, riots, and disinformation. The discussion then turns to the methodology, outlining the research approach used. The main body of the dissertation then presents the research findings, using the three key aspects of backlash politics as identified by Alter and Zürn (2020a) as a structure for analysis. Through its analysis, this dissertation examines how the far-right continues to evolve in the UK. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions about backlash politics, disenfranchisement, disinformation, and the stability of democracy in an era marked by technological transformation.

2. Backlash Politics: A Conceptual Discussion

The theoretical framework this dissertation uses is backlash politics. Backlash politics refers to reactive mobilisations by groups who perceive threats to their socioeconomic standing, identity, or ontological security (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). This framework is directly relevant to the 2024 riots; if these events were an instance of backlash politics, one would expect to see retrograde objectives, extraordinary tactics, and a threshold condition for entry into mainstream discourse present in how they unfolded (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 566-568). These expectations lay the foundations for the analysis in Chapters 5,6, and 7.

The principal objective of backlash politics is a retrograde return to a prior social condition, explicitly striving to return society to a past social order deemed preferable or more legitimate by affected groups (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 563). This reaction frequently takes the form of nostalgic rhetoric, emotional appeals, taboo-breaking behaviour, and active institutional reshaping (Gest, 2016: 116; Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 569). Gest and Gray (2015: 465) emphasise that backlash expressions range from overt rebellion (such as the riots) to disengagement from mainstream political processes (which itself is problematic), further evidencing the diverse responses. This makes such events difficult to address, as occurrences are often unique (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 563-564).

A primary driver of backlash politics is demographic change, which proponents perceive as existential (Gest, 2020: 682). Actors often frame such shifts as profound threats to their established cultural, economic, and political way of life (Schäfer, 2022: 1978).

Immigration, here, emerges as a prominent issue as it is perhaps the most fundamental instigator of demographic change. Backlash movements inherently view earlier demographic distributions as normatively superior and, thus, endorse retrograde objectives (Gest, 2016: 194). Consequently, extraordinary and unconventional tactics may be pursued (Alter and Zürn, 2020b: 743). While aimed at achieving symbolic and material reversals of demographic change, these actions often undermine established liberal-democratic norms, reflecting the disruptive nature of backlash politics (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

Identity politics is integral to the backlash, generating essentialist and emotionally charged discourse centred around notions of historical heritage, cultural purity, and national identity (Gest, 2020: 682). Nostalgia, emotional appeals, and deliberate breaking of societal taboos are commonly employed accelerants, increasing backlash movements' visibility and prominence in public discourse (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 567-568). This discourse facilitates the threshold condition, enabling once-fringe ideas to penetrate the mainstream sphere, and, when most effective, achieve desirable outcomes.

However, backlash politics' inherent retrograde objective faces fundamental constraints, primarily because demographic reversals are practically unattainable (Gest, 2020: 682). As a result, backlash leaders often pursue symbolic victories, using appeals to heritage and control over historical narratives to reinforce claims to cultural and national identity. Alter and Zürn (2020a: 574-575) identify three potential outcomes for backlash movements: exhaustion of momentum, achieving desired retrograde

changes, or absorption into mainstream institutional cleavages. Given backlash politics' existential framing and demographic irreversibility, loss of momentum or successful retrograde transformations are unlikely (ibid.). Hence, the key issue becomes how the cleavages produced by backlash politics integrate into mainstream discourse (Gest, 2020: 681).

Populism, defined by Mudde (2004: 543) as a struggle between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” could alternatively explain political divisions. While populism frames conflict between the people and the elite, backlash politics highlights a different tension. It focuses on a struggle against perceived outsiders and societal changes. This framework better encompasses the identity grievances and norm-breaking tactics seen in 2024, including the spread of disinformation and Islamophobia (Alter and Zürn, 2020a). Consequently, backlash politics provides a more encompassing framework for understanding how narratives transitioned from the fringe into the mainstream during the riots.

Other frameworks like relative deprivation theory (Siroky *et al.*, 2020) or resource mobilisation (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) explain facets of unrest (economic grievances or movement organisation) but do not fully account for the strong identity-based motive and norm-breaking tactics observed in 2024 (Alter and Zürn, 2020b: 749). Indeed, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. The broader backlash politics framework holds that movements may, in fact, even be strengthened by resource mobilisation strategies (Alter and Zürn, 2020b: 745). Thus, backlash politics is more encompassing for this dissertation as it synthesises the features in one coherent framework.

Furthermore, backlash politics is particularly relevant to socioeconomic conditions in the UK. The backlash politics framework enables a sophisticated analysis of contemporary political phenomena, which this dissertation argues is where backlash politics has become a driving force. These dimensions provide insight into the UK's political landscape, which is increasingly characterised by divisions exacerbated by demographic anxieties and identity politics (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

3. The Far-Right, Riots and Disinformation

3.1 The Far-Right in the UK

The far-right has long been present in UK politics, first coming to prominence in the 1930s with groups such as Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (Love, 2007: 449). While largely marginalised following World War II due to the stigma associated with ties to authoritarian regimes (Manucci, 2024: 2), the far-right have swung in and out of popularity through the second half of the century, with the rise of groups like the National Front in the 1970s and the BNP in the 1990s (Worley and Copsey, 2016: 28-33). More recently, far-right sentiment has been expressed through movements such as Tommy Robinson's[1] EDL and Britain First, which have leveraged concerns about immigration, multiculturalism (specifically Islam), and national identity in an effort to garner support (Morrow and Meadowcroft, 2019: 543). Analysis of far-right demonstrations from 2009-2019 reveals that the EDL was the most active far-right group, organising 452 demonstrations, far exceeding the next most active group, Britain

[1] Tommy Robinson is the pseudonym for Stephen Yaxley- Lennon (Cleland, 2020: 48)

First, which held 115 (Allchorn and Dafnos, 2020: 12-13). This disparity demonstrates the EDL's disproportionate prominence in the far-right space. The 2016 Brexit referendum, particularly the intense campaigning leading up to it, significantly accelerated the rise of nationalist and nativist sentiments (Faulkner, Guy and Vis, 2021; Goodman, 2021). This period not only provided a fertile ground for such rhetoric but also set the stage for divisions and extraordinary actions to continue influencing the political landscape. It is crucial to note that these movements were not merely reactions but were attempting to reshape the very foundations and nature of political discourse.

The far-right has evolved significantly over the past decade in the UK, particularly with the influence of platforms such as Telegram. Bovet and Grindrod (2022) explore the organisation and proliferation of far-right networks. They highlight how channels linked to extremist ideologies have proliferated across both the UK and the US, revealing a transnational dimension to far-right mobilisation (Bovet and Grindrod, 2022: 8-9). Such networks often use online platforms, indicative of a hybrid model of political engagement (Davidson and Berezin, 2018; Hanna and Busher, 2018). Furthermore, the concept of the far-right as a social movement captures the dual role of parties like UKIP and Reform UK, which operate within electoral politics and extra-parliamentary social mobilisation (Castelli Gattinara and and Pirro, 2019: 452-453). This fusion complicates traditional understandings of political organisations, suggesting that contemporary far-right entities may be better characterised as fluid entities rather than fixed political organisations.

3.2 Riots in the UK

Many scholars have examined rioting in the UK as a complex, multi-causal phenomenon. Far from being spontaneous eruptions of violence, British riots are increasingly viewed as symptomatic of deeper structural grievances, often emerging at the intersection of social marginalisation, political disaffection, and strained relationships with state institutions (Newburn, 2020: 60-62).

Early conceptualisations of riots were primarily rooted in the Le Bon (1995) psychological conception of crowds. Riots were considered irrational and emotive disturbances that were temporary breakdowns in the social order (Newburn, 2020: 55). However, such perspectives have since been displaced by new frameworks that emphasise understanding the material and political conditions underpinning collective unrest. One of the most influential of these is Waddington (2008: 681) 'flashpoints' model. This model allows for analyses of riots as the outcome of layered tensions operating across structural, cultural, contextual, and interactional dimensions (ibid.). In this framework, disorder does not arise solely from an immediate provocation but from accumulated grievances that become acutely manifest in specific trigger events.

Examples of rioting in Britain underscore this point. The 1980 St Paul's riot in Bristol, provoked by a police raid on a café that was a hub for the local Afro-Caribbean community, has been interpreted as a response to longstanding issues of racialised policing and economic neglect (Peplow, 2019: 50). Its importance for this dissertation was not only the structural conditions leading up to it, but also that it eventually spread as a movement. Protests in following years, such as in the 1981 Brixton riots, were

reported to have shouted, “Remember Bristol!” (Peplow, 2019: 66) - a slogan that underscored the interconnectivity of urban unrest and the power of collective emotive memories (Cooper, 2012: 22). The literature consistently highlights racial tensions under “Sus laws,” economic deprivation, and social alienation as key drivers of riots in the UK (Murji, 2018: 1823-1824). While the 2024 riots did not mirror earlier events in their ethnic makeup, they reflected similar feelings of exclusion and threats to ontological security, as well as the fact that they spread from the initial trigger event.

The 1981 riots across Toxteth, Handsworth, and beyond were not isolated moments but emblematic of broader social rupture. Scholars have characterised them as instances of “collective bargaining by riot” (Peplow, 2019: 68). This framework explains that marginalised groups, feeling excluded from formal political processes, resorted to disorder as a form of political expression (Lightowlers, 2014: 94). These riots can be interpreted as responses to the erosion of social protections and the decline of traditional industrial livelihoods, echoing a nostalgic, retrograde objective as theorised in the backlash framework (Alter and Zürn, 2020b: 744). The link between socio-economic dispossession and rioting has since become a recurring theme in the literature (Slater, 2016; Ince, Borén and Lindell, 2021: 6).

This theme resurfaces in accounts of the 2011 riots, which were initially catalysed by the police’s fatal shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham (Kawalerowicz and Biggs, 2015: 67). Although the ethnicity of participants was more heterogeneous than in previous episodes, underlying conditions of deprivation, alienation, and institutional mistrust persisted (ibid.). Lewis *et al.* (2011: 11-12) “Reading the Riots” project, a landmark study

led jointly by The Guardian and the LSE, found that economic hardship, lack of trust in the police, and a sense of being mistreated were widely cited by participants as motivations. They also found participation was disproportionately concentrated in areas of high deprivation, with 59% of the rioters coming from the 20% most deprived areas of the UK (ibid.: 14,19). This evidence challenged earlier criminological theories that downplayed economic conditions, reinforcing the view that material inequality and social exclusion are critical components of riot causation. Furthermore, the fact that 86% of the rioters said, when interviewed, that poverty was a key cause of the riots demonstrates not only it being a correlation but also a causation (ibid.: 11).

The aftermath of riots often involves a pivot toward securitisation. Government responses tend to centre on restoring order through harsher sentencing, increased police powers, and the deployment of surveillance technologies (Cooper, 2012: 22). Scholars argue that these responses can be counterproductive, addressing symptoms rather than the fundamental causes and exacerbating the conditions that produced unrest in the first place (Bleich, Caeiro and Luehrman, 2010: 279-280).

The key theme from this literature is that UK riots are rarely reducible to a single cause. They arise from a confluence of factors. While the exact triggers of disorder vary, the underlying themes typically remain consistent: systemic inequality, cultural exclusion, and the erosion of political voice—all elements central to backlash politics. This context is critical to understanding how such events may be ideologically appropriated. The far right, in particular, has demonstrated a capacity to frame civil unrest within narratives of cultural decline, national betrayal, and governmental incompetence. As this

dissertation later explores, this reframing renders riots not merely moments of social breakdown but potentially tools of political mobilisation.

3.3 Disinformation and Riots

Studies of the 2021 Capitol riot (Munn, 2021; Riley, 2022) show how insular online communities foster disinformation and reframe violence as justified defence of the in-group's values. Riley (2025: 4) identifies the "desire of belief" as a situation where a rumour is sufficiently aligned with ideological needs, it becomes functionally unfalsifiable. Although focused on the American context, a similar post-truth online environment (Newman, 2022) existed in Britain in 2024, creating a cultural infrastructure for backlash. The infrastructure was such that far-right rhetoric became mainstreamed. Like in the US, far-right actors in 2024 utilised disinformation and emotive appeals to rally support. However, unlike the US, Britain's far-right lacks a formalised political figure like a former president to unify around. Notably, the exploration of disinformation, which is less prominent in UK riot scholarship, offers a transferable context for understanding backlash mobilisation in the case of the riots.

3.4 Limitations and Contributions

As of writing, no academic literature has examined the 2024 riots in-depth; existing analyses are limited to journalism, preliminary reports, and works by think tanks. More broadly, the literature on the British far-right has typically focused on formalised groups and movements rather than spontaneous riotous episodes. Additionally, while there is some research on (far-right) media strategies, these have not been linked to real-world

outbreaks of violence in the UK context. Backlash politics, as a theory and phenomenon, is also relatively unexplored, with most of the research consolidated in the Special Issue of The British Journal of Politics and International Relations Vol. 22(4). This dissertation addresses these gaps by linking backlash politics with the far-right's new online disinformation campaigns and the 2024 riots, thereby shedding light on how the realms intersect in shaping the far-right. Before turning to the findings, the next chapter outlines the methodological approach used for this research.

4. Methodology

4.1 Critical Realism and Interpretivism

This dissertation is underpinned by a critical realist ontology. Critical realism holds that reality exists independently of our perceptions, but it also recognises the complexity of social phenomena and their multi-layered nature (Fuchs and Robinson, 2024). Riots, in the case of this dissertation, are understood as observable events that represent the deeper structural, social, and ideological dynamics that occur within an environment (Bhaskar, 1978). Critical realism accepts that causal relationships exist but acknowledges the complexity and contextual variability that make predicting and understanding social phenomena challenging (Fuchs and Robinson, 2024: 249-250). As such, this dissertation explores not only the material conditions around the 2024 riots but also the narratives and emotional logic that shaped and were shaped by them.

Epistemologically, the research aligns with interpretivism. Interpretivism pays particular attention to the many ways actors construct their life-worlds (Funk, 2019: 465). It assumes social realities are constructed through language, meaning-making, and interaction. This was essential to this research, which investigated how backlash politics can explain the far-right mobilisation in the 2024 riots. Rather than seeking objective, generalisable truths, this research aims to produce contextual, theory-informed insights into *how* and *why* the riots unfolded the way they did.

4.2 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis involves systematically examining language use, rhetorical strategies, narrative framing, and symbolism within data sources (Fairclough, 2003: 123-124). The analysis identified recurring discursive themes, symbolic language, emotive rhetoric, and representational strategies (ibid.: 134-135). The focus was on how narratives, emotional appeals, and symbols of identity were constructed and circulated through media coverage, political speech, and online discourse. This allowed the analysis to explore how the riots gained traction. This approach prioritised interpretive understanding over quantification (ibid.: 5-6), reflecting the research's commitment to explaining the factors driving far-right mobilisation in the UK in greater depth.

4.3 Rationale for Approach

The sources selected for this study were carefully chosen to ensure coverage of diverse, yet interconnected perspectives. They are broadly split into three categories: media

coverage, social media discourse, and public political responses. Sources were prioritised based on their prominence, relevance to backlash politics theory, and representation of broader narrative trends. Rather than blending qualitative and quantitative data, this research prioritised close qualitative analysis, situating language, symbolism, and framing within the broader theoretical lens of backlash politics (Fairclough, 2003: 6). While some statistical context is referenced to support broader arguments, these are used illustratively rather than as part of a formal mixed-methods design. The primary analytical mode remains qualitative and interpretive, with theory guiding both the selection and analysis of data.

4.3 Justification of Selected Methods

Adopting a qualitative, theory-driven approach was most appropriate for examining riots where causal mechanisms are layered, contested, and embedded within broader contexts. Instead of taking a quantitative analysis approach, this research prioritised understanding how meaning is constructed, communicated and understood. This required focusing on media framing, political discourse, and the amplification of identity-based grievances.

By conducting discourse analysis across a range of sources, the research explored how backlash politics is expressed in practice. This approach ensured sensitivity to the interpretive and affective dimensions of far-right mobilisation, central to understanding the character and consequences of the 2024 riots. The chosen methodology directly supports the dissertation's theoretical framework because backlash politics does not

assume a single causal pathway but instead offers a conceptual map for interpreting how subjective perceptions manifest as political action. A qualitative approach, therefore, is not only methodologically appropriate but also philosophically coherent with the dissertation.

4.3 Ethical and Methodological Transparency

Ethical considerations have consistently influenced this methodology and have guided data selection, analysis, and interpretation. The sensitivity of riot data has been addressed by ensuring a responsible representation of communities. The research also aimed not to amplify false information inadvertently, but to identify and contextualise the examples where possible. As a matter of principle, all the data used in this research is publicly available. This does mean that the research does not cover perspectives of rioters and the community not voiced online, which is notable, as many of these groups are typically very secretive (Ebner, 2020). Indeed, future research may seek to use interviews or other methods to capture offline or otherwise inaccessible perspectives. The analysis is grounded in well-established theory and reputable sources to mitigate this. However, the findings should be seen as interpretive insights specific to this case, and different research may categorise the narratives somewhat differently than in this dissertation, offering a basis for comparing future cases rather than being universally objective.

Nevertheless, the commitment to transparency and thoroughness in methodology, as explained in this chapter, maintains the ethical integrity of the dissertation and protects

against misrepresentation or oversimplification of the complicated dynamics. This methodological framework ensures an academically thorough, philosophically coherent, and ethically sound approach. The dissertation now turns to the first dimension of the backlash politics analysis- the retrograde objective.

5. The Retrograde Objective: Returning to a Prior Social Condition

At the heart of understanding the 2024 riots lies a central feature of backlash politics: a *retrograde objective,* the drive to return to a prior social condition (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 563). This concept captures the ideological belief that the nation has deviated from a better, purer past and must be wrestled back (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 566). The stabbings became a spark for such sentiment. Though triggered by a shocking specific tragedy, the violence was neither random nor unprecedented. Instead, it triggered grievances that had been accumulating for years, which far-right actors could quickly exploit and weaponise (Gest, 2020: 680). This chapter examines the vision of the past that the rioters and their far-right enablers sought to resurrect, focusing on how narratives of socioeconomic decline, cultural loss, and demographic threat converged into a nostalgic call to action. It shows how the grievances expressed, though catalysed by the stabbings, echo longstanding patterns of status anxiety and ethnonationalist nostalgia (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 53). The analysis that follows asks not only *what* past is being invoked but *why* and whose interests such invocations serve.

5.1 Socioeconomic Foundations of Disenfranchisement

The riots cannot be understood in isolation from the broader material conditions in which they occurred. Most areas that experienced riots have long faced the cumulative

impacts of deindustrialisation, austerity, and social disinvestment (Elsayed, 2018: 97). These economic pressures have been most acutely felt in working-class communities, where job insecurity, declining real wages, and a fraying welfare state have contributed to a sense of exclusion (Elsayed, 2018: 97; Halperin, 2023: 731). Merseyside, in particular, remains one of the most deprived regions in the UK, with child poverty rates standing at 22.3%, exceeding the national average of 19.8% (Tyrer *et al.*, 2024). Other examples, such as Middlesbrough, Blackpool, Hartlepool, Hull, Manchester, and Blackburn, all saw outbreaks of violence and are all in the top 10 most deprived areas (Ministry of Housing, 2019: 14). The persistence of economic insecurity and democratic distrust has entrenched societal pessimism, which has exacerbated resentment and created fertile ground for far-right exploitation of narratives of uncertainty and decline (Deo and Malik, 2024: 35).

Crucially, this economic insecurity was politically reframed. While the roots of frustration lie in material deprivation, far-right narratives recast these as the result of cultural betrayal and blamed immigration, political correctness, and liberal elites for what are fundamentally structural economic shifts. While economic conditions provide the basis for the discontent, the far-right's success relies on its ability to transform material grievances into cultural ones. By exploiting authentic anxieties about economic instability and cultural displacement, far-right leaders deliberately distort these issues, moulding them into extreme narratives that consolidate their control over public discourse. Through the process of constructing fears, the far-right can manipulate these feelings through emotionally potent language (Wodak, 2015: 4). This is consistent with findings in *Brexitland* (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020), where voters'

support for Brexit often correlates more strongly with perceived relative decline than absolute hardship. The riots of 2024 thus became a moment of expression for communities who feel that modern Britain is failing them economically and ideologically.

Southport itself exemplifies this turn. Once a prosperous Victorian resort town, it has experienced continual socioeconomic decline. With an ageing population and limited opportunities for the youth, narratives of lost status are commonplace, as exemplified by the population of 18 to 24-year-olds in Southport, which has declined by 21.8% over the past three decades (Town Funds, 2024). This economic marginalisation is mirrored in parts of Bristol, where 15% of residents live in areas among the 10% most deprived in England, and 21% of children reside in low-income families (Better Society Capital, n.d.). Far-right messaging in 2024 capitalised on this environment. It offered a simple message of 'reclaiming the past' to solve complex problems. As Norris and Inglehart (2019) find, those who perceive themselves as casualties of economic and cultural change are especially susceptible to backlash, creating a politics not of reform but of restoration.

5.2 Identity and Cultural Loss

While socioeconomic conditions provided the foundational grievances, identity politics gave these material concerns emotional resonance and direction. The far-right's ability to frame economic anxieties as cultural existential threats represents a crucial mechanism of backlash politics. The riots were animated by more than economic grievance; a sense of cultural loss empowered them. Far-right groups framed the

tragedy as evidence that "Britishness" itself was under siege and that only by violent reclaiming an older, purer national identity could order be restored (Elsayed, 2018: 96; Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 66). The growing perception that Britain's multicultural society is failing, with over 52% of respondents explicitly stating its dysfunction in a HOPE not hate survey, highlights a significant shift towards cultural anxiety and national identity rooted in ethno-religious conceptions (Deo and Malik, 2024: 6). This sense of existential threat is not new. Gest (2020: 680) effectively equates this phenomenon to native-born citizens feeling like they are 'strangers in their own land,' disoriented by rapid cultural change and alienated by the values of a cosmopolitan elite (Hochschild, 2016).

This dynamic can be seen in one of the most symbolic tweets (Figure 3) in the build-up to the riots on July 30, 2024, by an X user @AmyMek. The original video was posted by a local journalist at the peaceful vigil for the victims (5:54 pm). This was then repurposed by this US-based account of the founder of the organisation, Resistance Against Islamic Radicals (RAIR) (a group known for amplifying anti-immigrant narratives) (Friedberg and Donovan, 2019). Instead of reflecting the reality, the account acted quickly and reframed it with incendiary anti-Muslim messaging, playing upon some existing feelings of segments of the population. One revealing element of the tweet is the phrasing "Where is the Islamic migrant community?" which initially appears to simply raise questions but, contextualised, implicitly advances a far more sinister narrative of Muslim separation and disloyalty to the victims. The use of the language "dominate every aspect of British public life" further echoes this feeling of existential threat and ontological insecurity. It frames and collectivises the Muslim community as

homogenous, dangerous and entirely “migrant”. When put together, the effect implies some sense of a parallel society’s existence. The ‘Muslims’ are presented as dangerous to the ‘British’ way of life, being over-imposing in society and omnipresent, yet have no respect for the ‘British’ society. It insinuates that British Muslims are indifferent to the tragedy, lacking both empathy and moral alignment with the rest of the population. Such a framing reinforces narratives of cultural incompatibility and moral otherness. Fundamentally, it plays a function in normalising mainstream Islamophobia and creating an enemy. This is significant as within ten minutes of posting, it had generated 10,785,852 impressions (Baker *et al.*, 2024). It later went on to be viewed by over 5.5 million, underscoring how quickly actors can weaponise local tragedies to intensify identity-based polarisation, using algorithms to embed far-right frames within discourse.

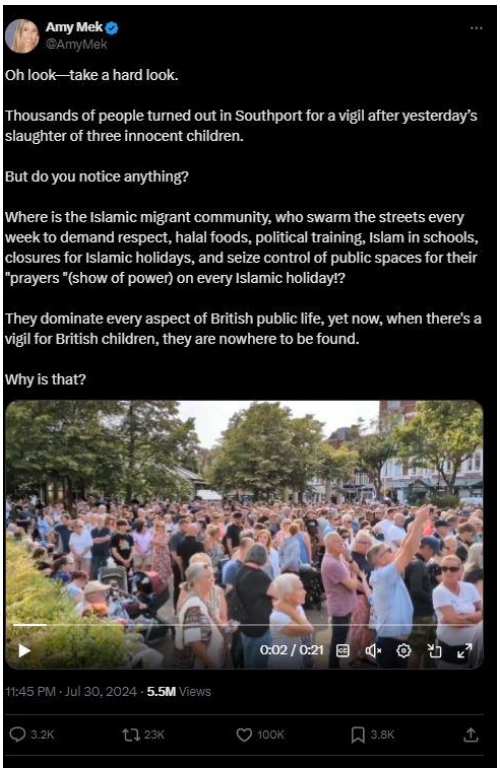

Figure 3. (Mek, 2024)

In this context, nostalgia becomes politically potent (Miller-Idriss, 2020: 11). The Britain the rioters had in their mind and wanted to return to was selective. They longed for a Britain where communities were safe, national identity was unambiguous, and traditional hierarchies were unchallenged (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 65). But such a past is not only idealised; crucially, it was largely imagined and romantically remembered (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 566; Gest, 2020: 682). As the cultural backlash thesis articulates, these yearnings are often directed not at actual historical conditions but at an invented past constructed in opposition to the present (ibid.). In 2024, this took the form of anti-woke slogans, hostility to multiculturalism, and a rejection of perceived liberal overreach, all centred around the idea that Britain had become too tolerant, diverse, and progressive (HOPE not hate, 2025: 3-5). The power of this narrative lies in its emotional resonance. It offers certainty amidst social change, a comforting story of victimhood and righteous anger. But critically, it is a story often told by and for segments of the population perceiving themselves as marginalised: typically older white males from economically deprived regions (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020: 50). The far-right's narratives are crafted to resonate specifically with this segment of the population, redirecting their frustrations through scapegoating, particularly of immigrants, as the cause of their grievances. This imagined community excludes as much as it includes, and in doing so, it justifies the exclusionary nature. Rather than being viewed as isolated incidents, the riots should be considered in the context of decades of hostile climate towards Muslims in Britain, in which experiences of aggression have been normalised and legitimised (Sönmez, 2025: 2-3).

5.3 Demographics and "Othering"

The retrograde objective is inseparable from its target: the "other". In the case of Southport, that other was fabricated almost instantly. The name "Ali Al-Shakati," entirely fictional, spread rapidly across social media, misidentifying the attacker as a recently arrived Muslim refugee, seen in Figure 4, on the now shut-down Channel3Now account posted on 29th July, the same day as the stabbings (Gregory, 2024a). Despite police confirmation that the suspect was, in fact, a British-born teenager[2], the disinformation stuck (Gregory, 2024a). The choice of name was deliberate as it racialised the event, transforming a personal tragedy into a symbol of national invasion.

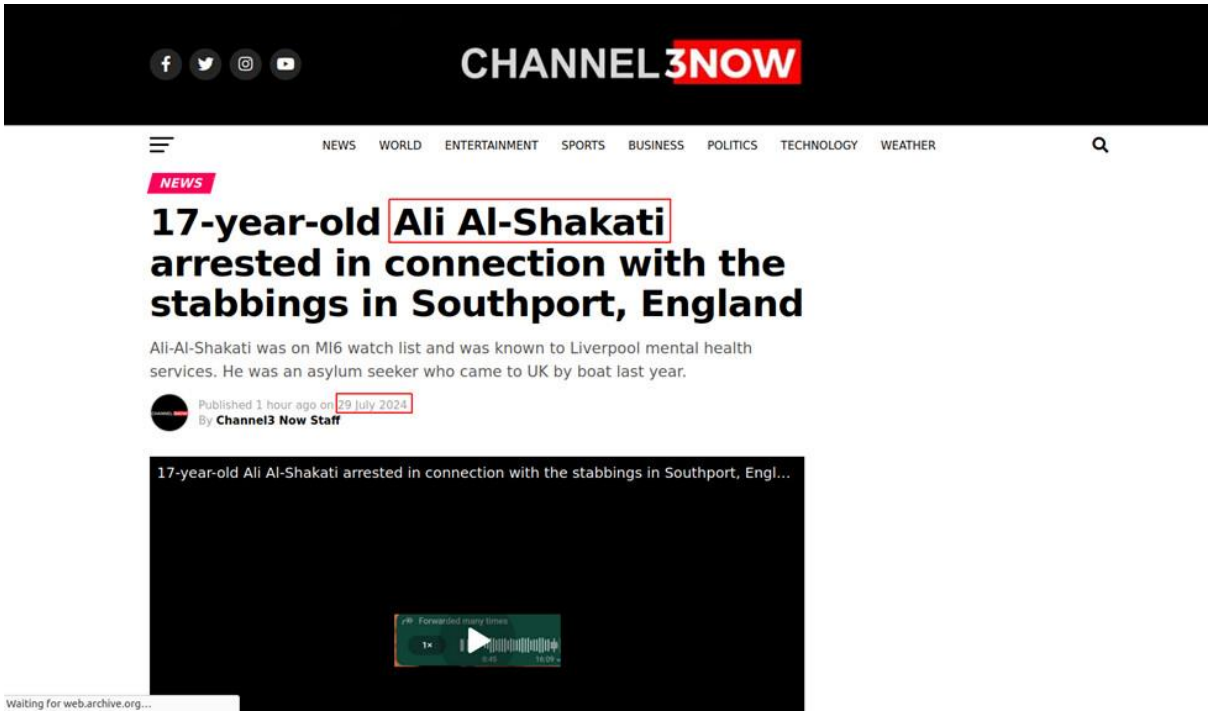

Figure 4. (Aly, 2024)

This is a long-standing tactic of far-right actors. In-group cohesion is achieved through the demonisation of an out-group, in this case, Muslims and asylum seekers. Far-right

[2] Axel Rudakubana was born in Cardiff and later moved to Lancashire (Barlow, 2025)

actors used the incident to reinforce a binary moral frame: “us” versus “them” (Tajfel, 1982; Mudde, 2004: 544). Online discourse around the riots was fear-inducing, reminiscent of genocidal propaganda in other contexts. It served to dehumanise and racialise its targets, such as mosques and hotels, and legitimise violence as defence (Allchorn, 2024: 98). This pattern of othering draws on established rhetorical tropes in far-right discourse, particularly the language of invasion and existential threat (Faulkner, Guy and Vis, 2021: 198). Language such as “Enough is Enough” deployed on social media depicts immigration as not merely undesirable but as a civilisational emergency, as shown in Figure 5, a graphic shared on Telegram and later reshared on TikTok, X, and Facebook (Elsayed, 2018: 98).

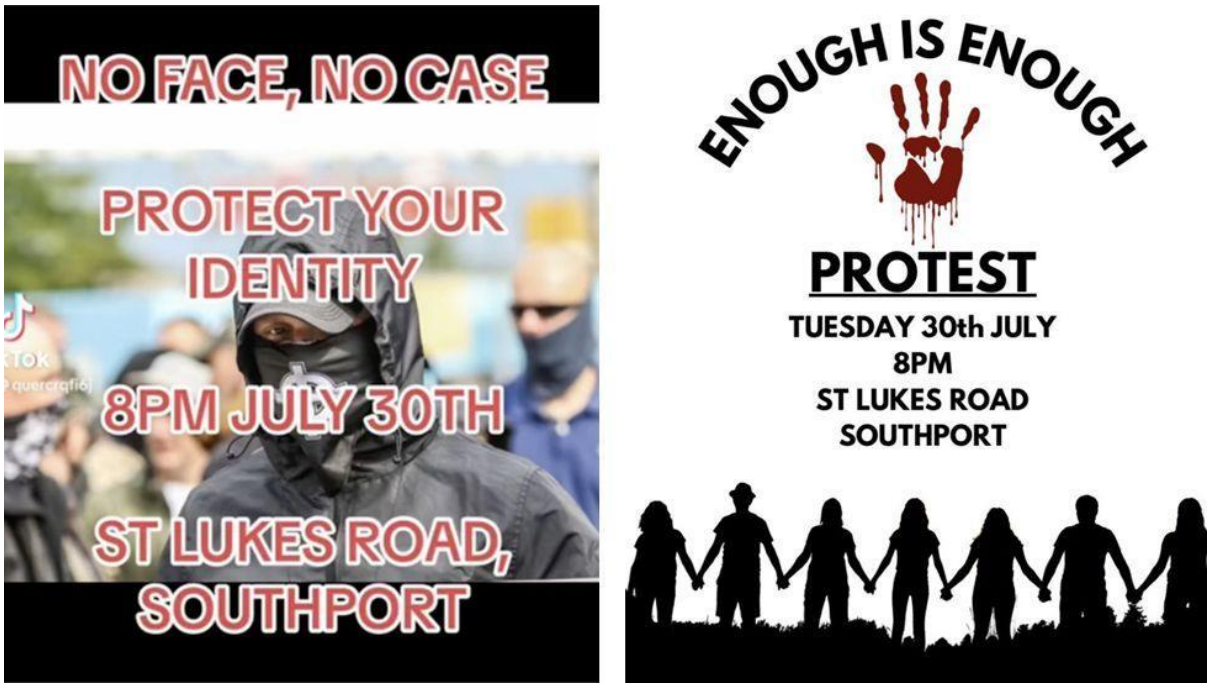

Figure 5. (Casciani and BBC Verify, 2024)

In the online posts surrounding the riots, these words appeared frequently alongside references to a supposed “war” in Britain, as seen in Figure 6 through a tweet by Elon

Musk, owner of X. Such language is not incidental. It taps into a broader ideological framework based on conspiratorial narratives that depict non-white immigration as a deliberate strategy to displace native populations, such as the Great Replacement theory (Camus, 2011) or "white genocide" (Miller-Idriss, 2020: 12). Though these theories were previously on the fringes of discourse, they have gained traction in online subcultures and were echoed in the riots' rhetoric. Some messaging of this type in other contexts has even been shown to invoke "counter-jihad" justifications, suggesting that Muslim immigration is part of a long-term war on Western civilisation (Choonara, 2024: 13). These narratives serve both to incite fear and to legitimise retributive violence under the guise of national defence.

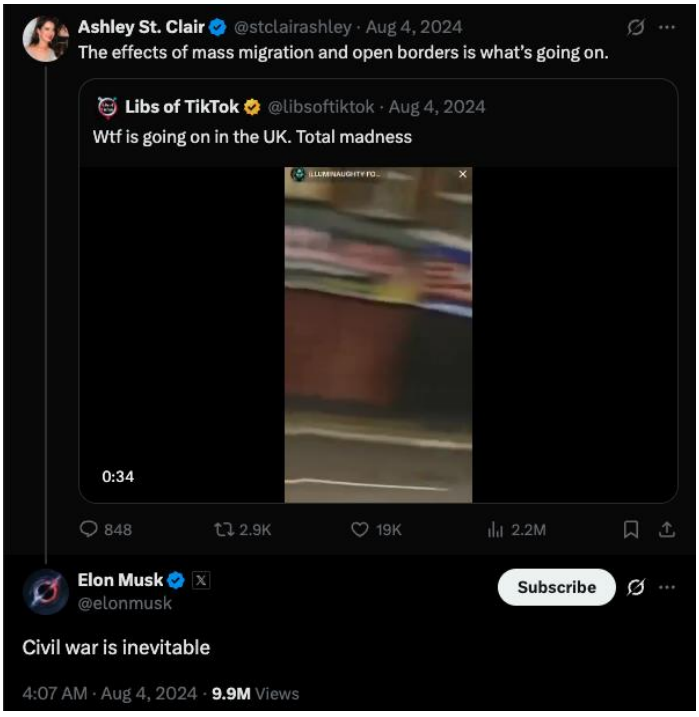

Figure 6. (St. Clair and Musk, 2024)

This racialised scapegoating taps into longer histories (Halperin, 2023: 731). From Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech to the BNP and the EDL, the far-right has consistently portrayed immigration as an existential threat (Newth and Scopelliti, 2025: 379). What

distinguishes 2024 is the speed and scale of the disinformation. Memes, deepfakes, and repurposed images and videos spread rapidly. Once embedded, these misrepresentations became resistant to correction, a hallmark of post-truth politics, where narrative coherence outweighs empirical accuracy (Newman, 2022). In this sense, the riots were not aberrant but symptomatic of the politics that have normalised xenophobia in defence of a romantically remembered past.

6. Extraordinary Tactics: Breaking Norms and the Spread of Disinformation

The underlying conditions set the stage, but without catalysing agents, they might have remained latent. Therefore, understanding the 2024 riots requires examining the extraordinary tactics used by far-right actors to subvert democratic norms, bypass traditional media, and penetrate mainstream discourse (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 564). These tactics often hinge upon aggressive and deliberate strategies such as disinformation, emotional manipulation, and riots as forms of political action, as a whole characterised as taboo-breaking (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 564; Orlando, 2023: 107). Such tactics epitomise the disruptive core of backlash politics, intentionally breaching democratic decorum and undermining trust in mainstream discourse (Miller-Idriss, 2020: 3). This chapter examines the interplay between disinformation, emotional manipulation, and violence, demonstrating how these elements coalesced into a potent strategy for far-right mobilisation.

6.1 Disinformation and Narrative Engineering

Central to the extraordinary tactics deployed during the riots was the deliberate propagation of disinformation. In addition to fabricating the name “Ali Al-Shakati,” far-right outlets also floated fictitious claims that the suspect was on an MI6 watchlist, as shown in Figure 4 (Gregory, 2024a; Gregory, 2024b). Such misrepresentations exemplify disinformation, which diverts from empirical accuracy in favour of narratives that align with pre-existing ideological biases, emphasising the ‘people’s truth’ (Hameleers, 2020: 146). These narratives first took hold within alternative media ecosystems, notably Telegram groups and now infamous accounts such as Channel3Now, as seen in Figures 4 and 8 (Gregory, 2024b). Indeed, quantitative evidence from ISD (2024) underscores this phenomenon, showing a 327% increase in posting activity on far-right Telegram channels in the 10 days following the stabbings, as shown in Figure 7. Lacking the legal and ethical barriers faced by traditional media ethics, these spaces facilitated the rapid spread of disinformation, amplified further through reposts on mainstream platforms like X and TikTok (Bauvois and Pyrhönen, 2023: 226-227). This is shown in Figure 8 with the @channel3nownews account posing as a reputable news outlet and commenting entirely fictitious information as to the background of the suspect. Moreover, the role of automated accounts (bots) was significant (ISD, 2024). By artificially boosting engagement, bots influenced the algorithmic visibility of posts, further raising their profile across accounts and subsequently distorting public perception (Faulkner, Guy and Vis, 2021: 202).

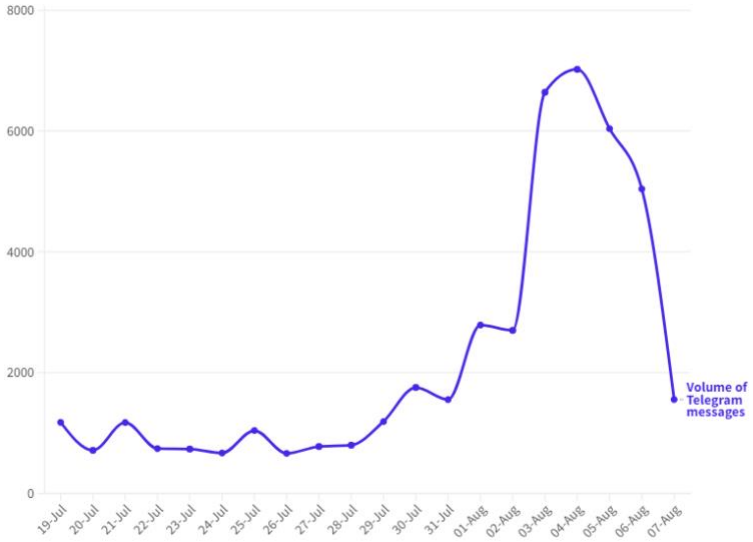

Figure 7. (ISD, 2024)

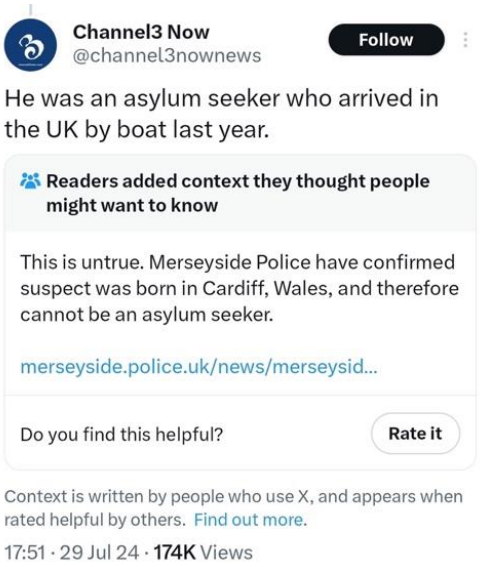

Figure 8. (@channel3nownews, 2024)

This effectiveness was partly due to an information vacuum created by legal restrictions on reporting juvenile crime, which exacerbated public uncertainty (Coffey and Moritz, 2025). Communities with low resilience proved particularly vulnerable to the far-right's strategic dissemination of misinformation during the Southport riots, underscoring the potency of digitally driven narrative manipulation to exacerbate existing tensions into widespread violence (Deo and Malik, 2024: 4). Understandably, people across the country wanted to know the truth behind the stabbings; however, legally, this was not initially possible as Rudakubana was 17. This created disgruntlement and an environment where people, already in shock, began to distrust traditional journalism, a hallmark of the contemporary far-right (Fallis, 2015: 402-403). By framing mainstream media as corrupt and unreliable, actors enhanced receptivity to their contrived narratives, creating a self-sustaining loop of disinformation resonating strongly with pre-existing grievances and fears (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018: 233). The ability of far-right networks to swiftly shape the narrative and foment action shows a turning point in strategy. The new far-right plan now explicitly includes maximising the opportunities

presented by technology and encouraging street militancy, exceeding what has been seen in the UK previously.

6.2 Andrew Tate as a Digital Influence

Among the most influential digital actors was Andrew Tate. Tate is a widely known social media personality with a vast reach (9.8 million followers on X), who describes himself as the 'king of toxic masculinity' (Roberts *et al.*, 2025: 2). Tate leveraged the immediate ambiguity following the attack to disseminate false claims about the attacker's background. His post, falsely identifying the perpetrator as a Muslim illegal immigrant, reached over 15 million views (BBC, 2024), illustrating the speed and scale of disinformation in the post-truth media environment. Despite subsequent police confirmation disproving these claims, Tate doubled down (Tate, 2024: 00:17:05), blaming the "media machine" for creating the riots (Tate, 2024: 00:18:49). This illustrates what Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018: 354) term 'epistemic closure', the insulation of audiences from corrective information.

Tate's rhetoric merged anti-immigration sentiment with hyper-masculinist framing, portraying the riots as a defence of women and children by 'real men' in the face of state failure. As seen in Figure 9, Tate posted a photo on X playing on some of the pre-existing (mis)conceptions of asylum seekers coming to Britain. The caption "Typical man from Cardiff" further creates distrust with the mainstream narrative and asserts that his analysis of the events was correct. This emotional mobilisation of masculinity spurred on far-right action with a narrative of protection where the state was failing to do so,

cloaking violence in moral legitimacy (White *et al.*, 2024). More striking still was Tate's paradoxical position. Tate is a Muslim convert (Tate, 2024: 00:00:11) who identifies as a 'Mixed-race' (Tate, 2024: 00:17:31), yet his rhetoric and social media posts not only aligned with but also guided racialised Islamophobic narratives. His capacity to traverse identity categories while disseminating far-right talking points rendered him what could be termed a boundary figure, able to extend influence across both mainstream and fringe audiences (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 567-568). In this sense, Tate's actions are underpinned by a calculated agenda that introduces audiences to extreme ideologies through gradual exposure cloaked in seemingly relatable or benign content.

Figure 9. (Tate, 2024b)

6.3 Use of Fear, Emotion, and Shock

Emotionally charged rhetoric has long been a potent tool for political mobilisation, particularly within backlash movements (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 569). In the context of

Southport, far-right actors strategically manipulated anger, fear, and resentment, heightening the emotional stakes of their messaging. Imagery and language were meticulously crafted to evoke powerful, visceral reactions. Narratives surrounding immigration were explicitly framed in existential terms, portraying demographic change as an imminent and irreversible threat to British national identity.

This tactic leveraged primal protective instincts already advanced by Tate, exemplified by the emotive emphasis on the young victims of the Southport stabbing, as seen in Figure 5, with the image of the silhouette of what appears to be a family at the bottom of the graphic. The portrayal of innocent children as victims of out-of-control immigration tapped into deep-seated anxieties, driving emotional mobilisation beyond rational policy discussions. Hasell and Weeks (2016) underscore this point in their research, revealing how anger intensifies partisan biases, driving belief in disinformation congruent with pre-existing ideological positions.

6.4 Riots as Political Action

The riots themselves should be understood as a deliberate, extraordinary tactic used by far-right actors to assert political influence outside traditional democratic processes. The ISD (2024) findings illustrate the strategic intent of actors. They found that mentions of riot locations had been posted before they happened in Bristol, Leeds, and Manchester. This shows the deliberate use of Telegram channels for targeted mobilisation and incitement of violence, demonstrating the premeditation and organisation happening in the build-up. Rather than spontaneous acts of disorder, this

confirms that the riots were calculated political actions rather than spur-of-the-moment eruptions of anger. Furthermore, the riots were strategically framed by far-right commentators and media as manifestations of "legitimate anger," a response to perceived neglect by political institutions and mainstream media (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 569; Allchorn, 2024: 98-99). This framing sought to legitimise norm-breaking behaviours, positioning violence as a necessary measure to draw attention to otherwise neglected grievances.

The tactical deployment of violence aimed not merely at physical disruption but at forcibly redirecting public and governmental attention toward far-right ideological claims. Previous tactics employed by groups such as the EDL primarily focused on organised street protests to assert visibility and intimidate opponents (Allchorn, 2024: 76). However, the 2024 riots marked an escalation, combining physical disruption with digital mobilisation, merging street violence with online outrage amplified through live streams, memes, and viral disinformation. The chants of ‘Who the f** is Allah?’ (Halliday, 2024) during the riots directly echoed Tommy Robinson’s EDL strategies, where anti-Muslim slogans are used to shock and provoke clashes. His prior success in mobilising thousands of supporters for the protest outside of Westminster (Mulhall, 2019) provided a blueprint for translating online outrage into physical unrest.

Furthermore, Robinson’s extensive influence was not unprecedented but relatively consistent with his longstanding capacity to incite public mobilisation. On July 27, just days before the Southport attack, Robinson held a demonstration attended by around 30,000 supporters in Trafalgar Square (Ducourtieux, 2024). Such a turnout, independent

of the stabbings as a catalyst, shows the existence of societal grievances and Robinson's ability to exploit them. This precedent of large-scale mobilisation further emphasises his role as a central figure capable of bridging online agitation with real-world action, crucially shaping the trajectory of the riots.

This evolution underscores a deliberate move towards extra-parliamentary tactics, which far-right groups openly embrace as essential components of their strategic playbook (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). By leveraging violence to create a spectacle, these groups challenged established political norms, presenting their actions as urgent, acceptable responses to a perceived crisis.

6.5 Counterarguments

One could argue that the riots were less a coordinated far-right push and more a spontaneous outburst of fear and frustration, and the far-right is opportunistically taking credit for a broader phenomenon. While anxiety and frustration at the stabbings were undoubtedly present, the patterned way narratives were spread and protests organised across multiple cities suggests an element of coordination beyond mere spontaneity. The far-right's infrastructure, such as Telegram groups, provided a structure that turned local anger into a national movement, which would not have been possible without cohesive effort.

Beyond this, one could also contend that the involvement of international far-right actors in amplifying disinformation shows that the riots were a result of global extremist

networks. Indeed, 14 of the top 20 most active Telegram channels were based outside the UK (Baker *et al.*, 2024). However, these actors only succeeded by strategically tapping into local grievances. Instead of manufacturing discontent, they provided narratives and rhetoric that played on existing grievances and growing emotions to channel resentment into organised actions. However, this demonstrates the potential for organised global networks to tap into localised backlash politics.

7. The Threshold Condition: From Fringe to Mainstream

Through extraordinary tactics, far-right actors successfully created a perception of crisis, urgency, and legitimacy around their ideological objectives. By systematically breaching democratic decorum and fostering distrust in mainstream narratives, these tactics facilitated a broader reshaping of political discourse, pushing radical fringe ideologies toward mainstream acceptance. Conscious that their extreme ideologies remain broadly unpalatable, far-right actors tactically and methodically introduce fringe ideas into public consciousness to normalise once-taboo subjects and breach societal acceptance thresholds. The threshold condition refers to the point at which ideas and sentiments previously confined to the fringes of political discourse begin to enter mainstream discourse (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 564). At this threshold, previously marginalised views shift from the fringes into the broader public discourse, giving them legitimacy and visibility (ibid.). This can potentially impact institutions, norms, and policy agendas. The riots exemplify how specific flashpoint events can elevate marginalised narratives, transforming isolated conspiracy theories into mainstream talking points.

7.1 Mainstreaming of Disinformation

Nigel Farage's (leader of Reform UK and previously the Brexit Party and UKIP) strategic rhetorical framing following the Southport incident typifies how disinformation crosses into mainstream consciousness. Leveraging his public credibility and position on prominent outlet GB News, Farage employed ambiguous statements such as "Is the truth being withheld?"[3] (as shown in Figure 10), a technique previously wielded during the 2016 Brexit campaign (Elsayed, 2018: 96; Choonara, 2024: 4). His approach implied official deception and harmonisation with Channel3News, without overt endorsement. This legitimises suspicion among a receptive audience already distrustful of traditional media sources.

Figure 10. (Wilde, 2024)

Another key actor in mainstreaming was Tommy Robinson. Robinson's rise offers crucial historical context for understanding the threshold condition at play in 2024. Emerging from the street protest culture of the late 2000s, Robinson gained prominence by framing Islam as fundamentally incompatible with British values, using

[3] Farage later said he "didn't believe any" of the reports that he was rhetorically questioning, and blamed the spread disinformation on Tate (McKeon, 2024)

confrontational street demonstrations and social media to bypass institutional gatekeepers (Allchorn, 2018). His move from fringe extremist to digital influencer illustrates how once-taboo ideas become familiar and publicly defensible. As early as 2018, Robinson boasted: “We’re now mainstream. The public supports us” (Robinson, 2018: 02:04:12). This confidence was not misplaced. Despite being abroad in Cyprus, Robinson played a pivotal online role in framing the Southport attack as an act of “Islamic invasion,” telling his 1.2 million+ followers on X to “rise up” and take to the streets. His post (Figure 11), which recycled rhetoric of immigrant danger and a takeover, was viewed over 5 million times and actively encouraged turnout at protests as they are the “only way to get heard” and that the riots were “justified”. Such messaging exemplifies how far-right actors utilise moments of crisis to reanimate their agenda. Robinson’s mobilisation strategy aligns and builds on backlash politics as it reveals how identity threat, nostalgia, and norm-breaking rhetoric can converge to push radical narratives across the threshold from the margins into the mainstream. The synergy between online falsehoods and figures like Farage blurring fringe and mainstream lines suggests that the riots were indeed a flashpoint where far-right narratives achieved a new level of mainstream penetration.

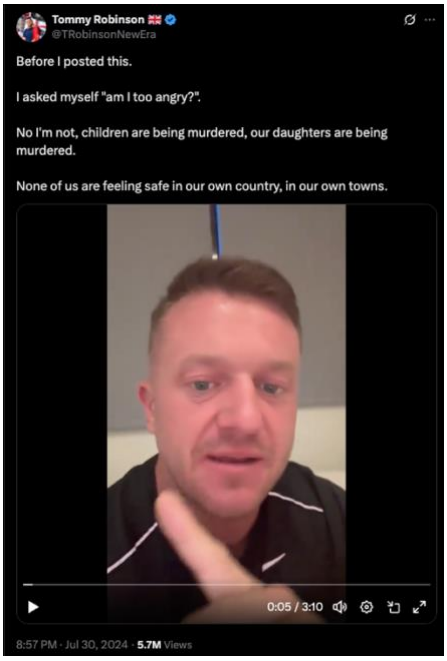

Figure 11. (Robinson, 2024)

The contrasting media framing by GB News compared to the BBC and Sky further accelerated the mainstreaming of disinformation. GB News, known for platforming right-wing voices, constructed narratives around immigrant criminality and governmental incompetence, thus implicitly aligning with the conspiratorial framing of the incident (Wilde, 2024). In contrast, mainstream broadcasters like the BBC and Sky News concentrated on factual clarity and official accounts, reporting with verified information when it became accessible (Gillespie, 2024; Hamilton and Gawne, 2024). However, attempts to debunk disinformation inadvertently reinforced fringe narratives by repeating the manufactured myths (Giusti and Piras, 2020: 9), exemplified by frequent references to the fabricated identity of the attacker (Gregory, 2024a). Historical precedents like the disinformation surge during the Manchester Arena bombing illustrate how media debunking efforts can paradoxically amplify fringe theories (Vicari *et al.*, 2024: 3-4).

The disparity in how disinformation proliferates across different media landscapes becomes particularly significant when considering younger audiences. Recent research by the BBC (2024) suggests that 30% of 16-24-year-olds now regard TikTok as the best news source. This reliance on a platform characterised by its rapid, personalised content distribution and minimal fact-checking substantially enhances younger generations' susceptibility to disinformation. This is the case in the 2024 riots, where much of the disinformation was indeed published on TikTok. Such preferences among youth amplify the potency of fringe narratives, enabling disinformation to cross seamlessly from the margins of online discourse into the mainstream.

7.2 Political Actors and Party Response

Key political actors further propelled backlash narratives into mainstream acceptance. Reform legitimised public outrage by positioning the riots as a somewhat justified reaction to political neglect and social erosion. Rather than diffusing the riots, it called the elite out for "two-tier-policing"[4] (Choonara, 2024: 4). This mirrors how the Leave campaign framed the Brexit vote as the masses regaining control from an undemocratic elite, echoing prior patterns from UKIP (Goodman, 2021; Orlando, 2023: 106). The substantial electoral support for Reform in 2024, attracting over four million votes, further entrenched a mainstreaming of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric, demonstrating the increasing acceptance and normalisation of previously fringe narratives (Lowles, 2024: 8). Ballinger (2024)'s findings support this. He finds that Reform voters are the only voting group who, as a majority, feel no sympathy for people crossing the Channel.

Some Conservatives adopted ambiguous stances, avoiding direct condemnation of disinformation-fuelled protests, thereby tacitly validating public frustrations. For example, Lord Sewell of Sanderstead blamed the riots on "Guardian editors and arsonists" at the Oxford Literary Festival (Lopez, 2025). Commentators like Douglas Murray (2024) amplified these narratives, framing the riots as symptomatic of broader societal anxieties over immigration and public safety, further embedding these ideas within respectable political discourse.

[4] The Home Affairs Committee (2025: 32) found no evidence of 'two-tier policing'

The subsequent ambiguity from mainstream leaders created fertile ground for public demands for hardline responses, including stricter immigration controls to tougher policing. With 66% of Britons feeling that “the political system is broken” (Deo and Malik, 2024: 7), the far-right have found it easier to act as the legitimate voice for the people. The febrile atmosphere following Brexit likely enabled more extreme narratives to gain traction (Allchorn, 2024: 103). Indeed, similar trends have historically emerged following events like the 2013 Woolwich attack, where policy rhetoric notably shifted towards securitisation and immigration control (Cameron, 2013). The 2024 riots seem to have followed such a shift, underlining how crisis-driven narratives reshape mainstream political agendas.

8. Conclusion

The brutal attack carried out by Rudakubana marks one of the darkest days in recent British history. It will be remembered not just as a tragedy but as a moment of grief etched into Britain’s collective memory. Whilst the families and the community yearned for time to mourn and remember, certain actors exploited the atrocity to advance their political agenda. Disinformation in the new technologically influenced society and the riots that followed serve as a critical case study of the far-right in Britain. This dissertation set out to evaluate whether these events marked a turning point in the far-right’s tactics and capabilities or whether the riots should be considered more as an opportunistic exploitation of grievances. There undoubtedly were both orchestrated elements and an element of spontaneity. Still, this dissertation has shown through backlash politics theory that the riots ultimately served as a venting point for pre-

existing socio-cultural and socio-economic anxieties rather than a comprehensive transformation of the far-right's strategy. The interplay of retrograde objectives, extraordinary tactics, and threshold-crossing narratives demonstrates both the adaptability of backlash movements and their continual reliance on foundational identity-based resentments.

The riots were not just an isolated eruption of anger towards the events but a product of decades of socioeconomic marginalisation, cultural dislocation, and political disaffection in segments of society that have been dealing with forces that have been changing their lived reality. Areas affected by the riots were largely ones that have been scarred by deprivation and generational decline, which were prime grounds for far-right narratives to take hold and trigger an emotional impact. The narratives framed immigration and multiculturalism as existential threats to a nostalgic British identity, one which far-right actors have been building over the years. The retrograde objective of reclaiming a mythologised past particularly resonated deeply among groups who feel they have been casualties of globalisation and progressive change, triggering emotive responses. The nostalgic yearning, albeit selective and ahistorical, played a key role as a mobilising force and elevated diffuse grievances into collective action – the riots.

The extraordinary tactics seen in the riots show the sophistication of the far-right in the 21st century. Just hours after the attack, coordinated disinformation campaigns had fabricated the perpetrator's identity as a Muslim asylum seeker who had recently arrived illegally in the UK. Influencers like Andrew Tate and Tommy Robinson used this fiction to call their followers to action. Despite conventional news outlets and, indeed,

the police debunking their myths, this served paradoxically in supporting their publicity. It shifted the narrative from one of violence to one framed as a legitimate defence of national identity. What is new about the riots is the speed at which they happened, online echo chambers and algorithms allowed the narrative to spread almost instantaneously. What is not new, though, is the longstanding tactics of racialised scapegoating, which indicates a continuity ideologically underneath the latest technological tools the far-right use.

Perhaps most fundamentally, these riots demonstrated the threshold condition of backlash politics, where fringe narratives penetrate mainstream discourse (Alter and Zürn, 2020a: 563). Figures like Farage, an MP, and outlets such as GB News gave implicit legitimacy to unfounded conspiratorial claims. The normalisation of such actions and rhetoric within what were previously considered respectable political circles reflects a broader erosion of democratic norms, wherein taboo-breaking discourse and emotional manipulation have become commonplace in British politics. When combined, the interplay between grassroots organisations and the polity reveals boundaries that may be blurring between extremist fringe subcultures and institutional politics in post-Brexit Britain.

This study contributes to scholarship on backlash politics by analysing how the digital era has altered far-right mobilisation. Furthermore, there has, so far, been limited research on the causes and reality of the 2024 riots. This dissertation addresses this gap. However, the study is limited by its reliance on publicly available data, which may overlook offline dynamics and the lived experiences of riot participants. The qualitative

focus, while giving interpretive insights, limits generalisability to other contexts. Future studies could employ a mixed-methods approach to quantify the interplay between socioeconomic indicators and narrative susceptibility or conduct ethnographic work to capture grassroots mobilisation processes.

The 2024 riots underscore the need for policy responses addressing both the symptoms and root causes of far-right resurgence. Combating disinformation requires robust regulation of social media and transparency in content moderation. Yet, such measures must be balanced against free speech protections to avoid exacerbating perceptions of elite censorship. Attention also needs to be paid to the disclosure of information provided to the public, as the legal barriers effectively created an information vacuum that the far-right was quick to exploit. Equally, interventions are needed to tackle the root causes of deprivation. Still, the riots can be typified as a backlash movement as they have brought the issues across the threshold and have forced mainstream political leaders to confront them. Keir Starmer captured this when he assessed that the rioters "saw the cracks in our society," pledging to do politics "differently" in response to the "societal black hole" revealed by the riots (Ducourtieux, 2024).

Considering the theoretical implications of the riots on backlash politics, it is helpful to address Alter and Zürn (2020a) analytical framework. They propose three potential outcomes for backlash movements: exhaustion of momentum, achieving desired retrograde changes or absorption into mainstream institutional cleavages (ibid.: 574-575). Applied to the British context, exhaustion of momentum and demographic reversal remain highly unlikely. Instead, the continued integration of far-right ideas into

mainstream discourse presents a more plausible trajectory. Understanding these potential outcomes is vital for policymakers and scholars aiming to safeguard democratic stability amid persistent and evolving backlash pressures.

Overall, though, the riots reveal a paradox in the far-right in Britain. Their power stems from their capability to exploit the new technological landscape and weaponise social anxieties, rather than ideological innovation. As the UK continues to battle transformative changes such as the legacy of Brexit, climate change, and AI, the underlying conditions for backlash politics will surely intensify. The fundamental challenge facing liberal democracy in the UK is, therefore, to channel these tensions into opportunities rather than allowing them to deepen divisions or escalate into further violence.

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