

## #Ready4Dishy? Assessing Twitter/X's Controversial Engagement in UK Political Communication

**Abstract:** The rise of social networking sites (SNSs) allowed common users to provide personal opinions, favouring the development of online discourse communities (Herring 2008). Though new media called for the identification of proper behaviours (Kiesler 1997), non-appropriate conducts have proliferated in SNSs, especially towards public personalities. Against this background, this paper aims at assessing the tone of reactions to institutional communications, especially in politics-related environments. Following a methodology used in other works (Meledandri 2023), the analysis would manually assess (van Atteveldt et al. 2021) the number of supportive vs. non-supportive and hateful engagement on Twitter/X. In detail, the assessment would focus on contents posted by Rishi Sunak following his appointment as new Prime Minister of UK in October 2022. Results from six examples show that three out of four comments in response to Sunak's contents are negative. Negativity and hate affect the reach and status of institutional stakeholders (Rathje et al. 2021), crushing the traditional affiliation process between politicians and their (alleged) electorate.

**Keywords:** *Social Media Studies, Social Media Discourse Analysis, Hate Speech, Sentiment Analysis, Political Communication, Politics in the UK*

### 1. Introduction

The need to interconnect with others for different reasons has proved to be a fundamental need when it comes to share information and build relationships. Over the years, technology revolutionized conventional communication, mostly based on face-to-face and proximity-based acts, leading to the emergence of a proper digital age based on instant and seamless interrelations.

After all, activities such as “social change, economic development, and human flourishing depend on innovation”,<sup>1</sup> and communication practices in digital environment have been representing a consolidated reality for some years. The recent COVID-19 pandemic surely boosted this process, as the pandemic caused social (and direct) interactions to be reimagined; at the same time, digital and online communication tools proved to be an effective solution to overcome physical restrictions imposed by lockdowns and social distancing policies, and new communication-related technologies emerged and/or became entrenched. The post-pandemic scenario opened new frontiers in terms of human and social interactions, but it also witnessed the ultimate development of new forms of technological connection based on non-human agents, such as AI.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most relevant consequences of the increased use of digital media is the crucial role of online platforms in fulfilling people's need to convey ideas and opinions, as well as emotions and feelings. In this sense, online platforms represented a proper emotional shelter during the pandemic, certifying the pivotal role of such tools in voicing users' emotive statuses.<sup>3</sup> In this framework, it is important to underline that the choice of a suitable online platform is the key to provide successful

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<sup>1</sup> Jiawei Sophia Fu and Joshua B. Barbour, “Contextualizing Communication for Digital Innovation and the Future of Work”, *Journal of Communication*, 74 (2024), 36-47.

<sup>2</sup> Anfan Chen et al., “Editorial: Reimagining Communication in a Post-pandemic World: The Intersection of Information, Media Technology, and Psychology”, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14.1154044 (2023), 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1154044.

<sup>3</sup> Ran Feng et al., “Social Media as Online Shelter: Psychological Relief in COVID-19 Pandemic Diaries”, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13.882264 (2022), 0.3389/fpsyg.2022.882264.

messages and interactions, depending on the *real* intention of users when conceiving such messages. As a matter of fact, the massive availability of platforms gives users the possibility to choose the most appropriate one depending on the goal to be attained, both in terms of active and passive users. Every kind of interaction – verbal or non-verbal, for instance – is part of a (digital) meaning-making process, with repercussions in both language and discursive terms.<sup>4</sup> This broad spectrum of linguistic possibilities may result in a diversified range of ideas conveyed by users, which in turn may lead to unique language acts. At the same time, ideas conveyed online can also result in pattern of repetitions that could be evaluated in order to analyse the impact that these acts could have in a broader language context and in these digital environments.

Against this background, this paper tries to shed light on a relevant trend that has been characterising online environments in recent years. A fundamental human right, that is freedom of expression,<sup>5</sup> often exceeds reasonable boundaries thus giving rise to language phenomena that are perceived as a new “normal” standard. In particular, the massive use of discriminating, violent and hateful contents has invaded the Net – and it is here to stay, also in terms of providing some *neutral* language acts with another textual and ideological effectiveness. Hate speech, in particular, leaked into “normalised communications through instant messaging systems [and] created a window of opportunity in which the expression of violent messages is no longer hidden or considered uncharacteristic of an ideological or political discussion”.<sup>6</sup> This is why hateful messages become more relevant than neutral or positive ones since they have greater emotive impact in the digital readership, shaping the whole discourse-related reach accordingly. Due to their nature, the massive presence of hateful content may infringe social networking platforms’ content policies, which are needed in order to provide reasonable interactions among users. Even though the presence of such policies may have direct consequences on Social Media discourse,<sup>7</sup> it is also true that “content moderation is hard [...] because it is wholly unclear what the standards should be”;<sup>8</sup> therefore, SNSs tend to be somehow tolerant regarding the thorny issue of hate speech.

This study aims at providing an empirical assessment in terms of the amount of toxicity (i.e. hateful and disrespectful contents) in response to institutional messages in online digital environments. In particular, the analysis would evaluate the number of positive vs. negative messages written as comments to some posts on Twitter (recently rebranded as *X*) issued by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Rishi Sunak, after being appointed in October 2022 following a political reversal within the Conservative Party.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding an event of this kind generates discontent among users & voters, the analysis shows that the degree of discontentment is voiced *a priori*, irrespective of the political event in itself. The paper is structured as follows: after describing the main features of Social Media discourse and the language-related implications of hate speech in online environments, the empirical section will focus on a case study involving the retrieval of data from a Social Media platform (Twitter/*X*). In particular, six examples involving the British political scene will be taken into consideration, focusing

<sup>4</sup> Majid KhosraviNik, “Digital Meaning-making Across Content and Practice in Social Media Critical Discourse Studies”, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 19.2 (2022), 119-123.

<sup>5</sup> “Freedom of expression and information”, *Council of Europe*, [www.coe.int/](http://www.coe.int/)

<sup>6</sup> Fernando Miró-Llinares et al., “Hate is in the air! But where? Introducing an Algorithm to Detect Hate Speech in Digital Microenvironments”, *Crime Science*, 7.15 (2018), 10.1186/s40163-018-0089-1.

<sup>7</sup> Susanne Kopf, “Content Policies in Social Media Critical Discourse Studies: The Invisible Hand of social media providers?”, *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines (CADAAD)*, 11.1 (2019), 1-19.

<sup>8</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Harriet Sherwood, “Rishi Sunak to become first British PM of colour and also first Hindu at No 10”, *The Guardian*, Monday 24 October 2022, [www.theguardian.co.uk](http://www.theguardian.co.uk), accessed 1 May 2024.

on Rishi Sunak's first institutional steps after his appointment. The tweets/posts<sup>10</sup> will be actually assessed via the bulk of comments following Sunak's Social Media-conveyed messages. The results will be evaluated both quantitatively (in terms of the amount of positive vs. negative messages on a single case vs. overall perspective) and qualitatively by providing some examples from the bulk of comments assessed, thus trying to understand the kind of language used in this form of vertical, top-down engagement (i.e. from an institutional message to the relevance of comments from *common* users).

## 2. The Relevance of Social Media Discourse

As stated above, interactions in online environments have been playing a central role in the field of communication. Part of the digital revolution, they are characterised by distinctive features though encompassed within conventional forms of language acts. Their importance has been growing over time, up to becoming "a massive presence [...] in our daily routines [...] [implying an] endless flow of information exchanged via networks".<sup>11</sup> The massive availability of data represents a milestone in re-defining the related language use and hierarchies among the stakeholders involved in this process. From a linguistic point of view, there has been a broadening of the paradigm based on CMC (Computer-based communication)<sup>12</sup> into forms of Computer-Mediated Discourse, "distinguished by its focus on *language and language use*".<sup>13</sup> Language acts in online environments deeply depend on the medium used and the intentions of addresser(s), thus allowing for a multi-node interconnection of users and related communication acts.<sup>14</sup> However, it is on some particular platforms that discourse(s) can be enacted and commonly recognised. Social Networking Sites (SNSs), also labelled as Social Media (SM) outlets, proved to be real aggregators in terms of users, but also in terms of significant language acts. The fragmentation and the related popularisation of such platforms enacted different discourses, and gave users "an opportunity to share mostly unfiltered opinions and allow a greater variety of ideas and opinions to be available in the public sphere".<sup>15</sup> As a consequence, sharing one's point of view in multifaceted forms has become a common practice with unlimited potential that generates language instances, though several variables are involved in the related decoding process. In scholarly terms, the prominent role of SNSs led to the emergence of Social Media Studies that focuses not only on the role of these platforms but mainly to analyse social phenomena such as representation of reality/ies, the spreading of information or intergenerational communication.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) hinges upon the manifold forms of communication in these scenarios not only in terms of different topics and interests, but also to highlight the multimedia and multimodal nature of these interactions, labelled as "structured representations [...] including the newly emerging meaning-making artefacts and practices on Social Media, e.g. smileys, regimes of Likes, tags, etc.". <sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that SM communication needs to rely on such multimodal forms of expression to accomplish meaning-making practices and to overcome any possible constraints that face-to-face contexts of use

<sup>10</sup> Note: In this analysis, tweets/posts refer to contents posted on Twitter/X: after the rebranding process, the contents on this platform formerly known as *tweets* have changed to a more general notion of *posts*.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Petroni "Pervasive Technologies and the Paradoxes of Multimodal Digital Communication", *LEA – Lingue e letteratura d'Oriente e d'Occidente*, 3 (2014), 259-271.

<sup>12</sup> Susan C. Herring, "Computer-mediated discourse", in Deborah S. Tannen, Deborah Schiffrin and Heidi E. Hamilton, eds., *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 612-634.

<sup>13</sup> Susan C. Herring and Jannis Androustopoulos, "Computer-mediated discourse 2.0", in Deborah S. Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton and Deborah Schiffrin, eds., *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis – 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2015), 127-151.

<sup>14</sup> John Scott, *What Is Social Network Analysis?* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Gwen Bouvier, "What Is a Discourse Approach to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Other Social Media: Connecting with Other Academic Fields", in Gwen Bouvier, ed., *Discourse and Social Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 1-14.

<sup>16</sup> Nicoletta Vittadini, *Social Media Studies* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Majid KhosraviNik, "Digital Meaning-making Across Content and Practice in Social Media Critical Discourse Studies", in Majid KhosraviNik, ed., *Social Media Critical Discourse Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 1-5.

would fulfil more easily. This is why, within the framework of CDS-oriented analyses within SM platforms, tool-specific devices<sup>18</sup> and non-textual and paralinguistic elements contribute to the realization of discourses which, in turn, grow virtual communities<sup>19</sup> based on variables such as common interests, languages, geographical areas, gender, age, etc.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Beyond Freedom of Expression: Hate Speech as an Unresolved Issue in SM Contexts

As communication via SM outlets proliferates, several issues need to be challenged and solved accordingly. If “the world of meanings in Social Media impacts on individuals [...] and infiltrates into the everyday life of practice users”,<sup>21</sup> it is also true that such impact could also affect users negatively, bringing the semiotic significance of these language acts beyond the realm of digital communication.

A concerning issue deals with the increasing propagation of negativity in digital and online environments. Defined as “a common form for expressing prejudice and aggression”,<sup>22</sup> the phrase *Hate speech* encloses a plethora of verbal (and non-verbal) forms of communication aimed at conveying harmful opinions towards an addressee or a group of people belonging to the same category. The use of derogatory terms has always characterised human communication, but these language practices had in online arenas – which can be labelled as spaces perceived by users as being “without any gatekeepers”<sup>23</sup> – an optimal breeding ground. In order to limit the impact of such behaviours, the Council of Europe tried to define hate speech as “all forms of expressions which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin”.<sup>24</sup> This definition needs to be as comprehensive as possible in order to provide a legal framework needed to exclude these language occurrences from freedom of expression, which represents a fundamental right granted to people and extended to communication in digital and online scenarios in 2012.<sup>25</sup> From a legal point of view, it is difficult to frame hate speech due to the different legal systems it may fall in, as well as it entails an “uneasy balance between freedom of expression and the prohibition of incitement of hatred”.<sup>26</sup> In these contexts, hate speech is envisaged as a “media practice [and] a network of multiple and interwoven media layers in which discourses emerge”,<sup>27</sup> thus characterising its digital and persistent nature. Though hate speech could be labelled as

<sup>18</sup> Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk: Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Susan C. Herring, “Virtual community”, in Lisa M. Given, ed., *Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (London: SAGE, 2008), 920-921.

<sup>20</sup> Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Cemile Tokgöz Şahoglu, “Sexism in digital discourse of women. Connecting the digital and social dimensions when comparing the #Sendeanlat and #Metoo campaigns”, in Majid KhosraviNik, ed., *Social Media and Society: Integrating the Digital With the Social in Digital Discourse* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2023), 167-186.

<sup>22</sup> Areej Al-hassan and Hmood Al-Dossari, “Detection of Hate Speech in Social Networks: A Survey On Multilingual Corpus”, *Computer Science and Information Technology*, 9.2 (2019), 83-100.

<sup>23</sup> Massimiliano Demata et al., “Editorial”, *Altre Modernità* (2018), Special Issue: *Language and Discourse in Social Media: New Challenges, New Approaches*, ed. By Massimiliano Demata, Dermot Heaney and Susan C. Herring, i-x.

<sup>24</sup> “Guide to human rights for Internet users. Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)6 and explanatory memorandum”, *Council of Europe*, [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int).

<sup>25</sup> “World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development Global Report 2017/2018” (Paris: UNESCO and University of Oxford, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Victoria Guillén-Nieto, *Hate Speech: Linguistic Perspectives* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2023).

<sup>27</sup> Alejandro Barranquero and Susan Morais, “Hate speech as a media practice. The portray of haters and polarization in *The Internet Warriors*”, in Marta Pérez-Escobar and José Manuel Noguera-Vivo, eds., *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 193-204.

a specific category (unlike more general forms of aggressive speech<sup>28</sup>), it is undoubted that defamatory language does have a persistent impact in online communication, especially within the boundaries of SNSs due to their nature of networks of interrelated relationships among people/users. Reasons for this scenario may be found in the fact that there is neither face-to-face nor physical contact, and a physical filter (a screen, or a communication infrastructure) is used as a medium to overcome any language filters. Furthermore, in online scenarios there is a sort of *levelling effect*, or a sensation of a lack of hierarchical structure; everyone feels on the same level, especially when confronting the so-called Establishment. This is why common users are more likely to “challenge” personalities – as this study tries to demonstrate – thanks to the opportunity provided by SNSs in reaching anyone directly. This condition is also dependent on a poor culture of the Internet in not considering the consequences of some behaviours online, which may have serious repercussions in real-life contexts.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. Grassroots Negativity: Assessing the Amount of Toxicity in Response to Institutional Tweets/Posts. A Case Study

In order to confirm the above-mentioned assumptions according to which SM discourses are ravaged by hate speech and negativity, an analysis involving a specific topic has been carried out. Negative comments could be commonly detectable in online correspondence, but they are more likely to be found when controversial and divisive topics are involved, or when polarised views are backed by resorting to derogatory remarks. Politics is a case in point, since its communication practices lead to a harsh polarisation of views and those “who engage in divisive discourse typically rely on ideology to justify their points of view, and they expect their listeners will fall back on ideology to blindly accept such points of view”.<sup>30</sup> In SM contexts, ideological polarisation is a spiral process since “these mechanisms are related to the new media role of social platforms and to the use of social media by politicians [...] most politicians are delivering their official statements through these platforms, a single piece of mis/disinformation will rapidly become an instrument for ideological polarization used by allies and enemies”.<sup>31</sup> This implies that the partisanship process that creates divisive ideologies involves all stakeholders. As a matter of fact, politicians try to intercept their (digital) electorate as a consequence of a massive involvement of users in political debate online, often characterised by non-constructive, harsh and polarised discussions.<sup>32</sup> The transfer of political discourses from real-life scenarios to online environments has been a growing trend, thus confirming the role of SM outlets as political arenas where politicians are actively involved in sharing their policies.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, SNSs represent a public space where everyone could enact interactions in response to institutional messages, which represents the core of the analysis of this case study.

##### 4.1 Background: The Troubled Post-Brexit Political Framework in the UK

The analysis has been carried out focusing on some contents posted by British political representatives. Framing the context in which these acts have been uttered is of paramount importance to understand the

<sup>28</sup> Isabel Ermida, “Distinguishing Online Hate Speech from Aggressive Speech: A Five-Factor Annotation Model”, in Isabel Ermida, ed., *Hate Speech in Social Media: Linguistic Approaches* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 3-34.

<sup>29</sup> Sara Kiesler, ed., *Culture of the Internet* (Mahway NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Zompetti, *Divisive Discourse: The Extreme Rhetoric of Contemporary American Politics* (Solana Beach, CA: Cognella academic publishing, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Marta Pérez-Escolar and José Manuel Noguera-Vivo, “How did we get here? The Consequences of Deceit in Addressing Political Polarization”, in Pérez-Escolar and Noguera-Vivo, eds., *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Society*, 15-32.

<sup>32</sup> Ian Rowe, “Civility 2.0: A Comparative Analysis of Incivility in Online Political Discussion”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 18.2 (2015), 121-138.

<sup>33</sup> Sara Bentivegna, *A colpi di tweet. La politica in prima persona* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015).

kind of reaction expected in the comments that follow institutional tweets/posts. The post-Brexit scenario has been affecting the political framework in the UK for some years, and the aftermath of the withdrawal of the nation from the European Union still has disruptive effects on international trade processes<sup>34</sup> but also in terms of cultural and media-related terms in the wake of other populist campaigns in the transnational scenario.<sup>35</sup> Soon after the Brexit vote, Morphet concluded that “each day brings another news headline, fresh resignation or unexpected implication of what is at risk for the UK”,<sup>36</sup> underlining the uncertain situation that characterised the 2016 popular vote.

Brexit proved to be a divisive and polarised issue not only for UK citizens but also for the political Establishment.<sup>37</sup> In the timespan 2015-2024 (as of May 31, 2024) five Prime Ministers have been appointed after re-shuffles or general election, all belonging to the Conservative Party. Since October 25, 2022, the incumbent PM of the United Kingdom has been Rishi Sunak (as of May 31, 2024). Sunak is a British politician with Indian roots (his parents had Punjabi descent), who had been MP since 2015 and had an official role in the Boris Johnson's government as he had been appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer (2020-2022). Sunak is considered a rising star in the UK political scene; at the same time, his political career intertwined with his private life and his out-of-politics identity. As a matter of fact, Sunak was born in Britain to East African-born Hindu parents of Indian descent; furthermore, his personal wealth allows him and his family to be included among the richest people in UK.<sup>38</sup> These conditions could influence voters' behaviour and attitude towards candidates,<sup>39,40</sup> since they could be perceived as distant from common people's needs.<sup>41</sup> This confirms that labelling and prefabricated categorizations help in constructing and de-constructing public figures,<sup>42</sup> and Sunak is no exception in this sense.<sup>43</sup> Many negative comments to Sunak's institutional communications on SNSs emphasise that his origin or his wealth are two recurring factors used to utter negativity, as this study tries to demonstrate.

#### 4.2 A Top-Down Analysis of Tweets/Posts by Rishi Sunak: Setting Parameters

In the light of the politically sensitive topic and context, the bulk of reactions to institutional tweets/posts may not follow traditional affiliation processes, resulting in a mixed engagement in which negativity can overcome the impact of supportive feedbacks in SM contexts. Following a vertical, top-down communication analysis implemented in other studies,<sup>44</sup> the assessment of comments to the institutional contents conveyed via SNSs would provide an overview of the general sentiment of users towards a politician and/or towards politics.

<sup>34</sup> Steven Brakman et al., “EXITitis in the UK: Gravity Estimates in the Aftermath of Brexit”, *De Economist* 171 (2023), 185-206.

<sup>35</sup> Barbie Zelizer, “Resetting Journalism in the Aftermath of Brexit and Trump”, *European Journal of Communication*, 33.2 (2018), 140-156.

<sup>36</sup> Janice Morphet, *Beyond Brexit? How to Assess the UK's Future* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Monika Brusenbauch Meislová, “Discursive Construction of Affective Polarization in Brexit Britain”, in Pérez-Escolar and Noguera-Vivo, eds., *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Society*, 98-112.

<sup>38</sup> As per “The Sunday Times Rich List 2024”, *The Times* (2024), [www.thetimes.com](http://www.thetimes.com).

<sup>39</sup> Philip Cowley, “Politicians – we warn you not to be wealthy...”, *YouGov UK* (2024), [www.yougov.co.uk](http://www.yougov.co.uk).

<sup>40</sup> Esther Webber, “Is Rishi Sunak Too Rich to Win the UK Election?”, *Politico* (2024), [www.politico.eu](http://www.politico.eu).

<sup>41</sup> Sana Noor Haq, “Sunak's wealth and right-wing politics mean he is far from representative, British Asians say”, *CNN* (2024), [www.edition.cnn.com](http://www.edition.cnn.com).

<sup>42</sup> Joy Moncrieffe and Rosalind Eyben, eds., *The Power of Labelling: How People Are Categorized and Why It Matters* (London: Earthscan, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> In an interview with BBC, host Laura Kuenssberg showed Rishi Sunak a word cloud with the most common responses to the question “What does Rishi Sunak stand for?”. Most of the relevant words involved his personal wealth (Rich people, Wealth, Rich, The Rich, Money, etc.). *X* (2024), [www.x.com/BBCPolitics/status/1708418979151151508](https://www.x.com/BBCPolitics/status/1708418979151151508).

<sup>44</sup> Francesco Meledandri, “Out-of-the-(ballot)box: legitimation of a new popular will in Brexit-related social media engagement”, in Katherine Ackerley et al., eds., *Thinking Out of the Box in English Linguistics, Language Teaching, Translation and Terminology: Proceedings of the XXIX AIA Conference* (Padova: Padova U.P., 2023), 157-182.

The analysis has been carried out on Twitter, a microblogging SNS which has been rebranded as *X* in July 2023. There are several reasons behind this choice. First of all, almost all profiles are set as public, thus granting a vast amount of free-to-use data. Furthermore, unlike other SNSs that spur users to use their real identity (such as Facebook, where users are more likely to create networks comprised of friends and relatives from real life<sup>45</sup>), many Twitter/X users use pseudonyms and non-identity-based references as their account names since those networks are more likely to be built on content-based or discourse-based interests. This aspect favours “conflict and polarisation emphasised by the relative anonymity, lack of physical presence and consequent *deindividuation* of computer-mediated communication”.<sup>46</sup> The nature of Twitter/X allows users to anchor comments to the post it refers to, thus granting contexts and co-texts to be easily inferred. In addition, a wise use of tool-specific devices such as hashtags and mentions support the development of discourse communities based on interests, affiliation, origin, language – and also shared targets to attack.

## 5. Material and Methods: Identifying Case Studies (CS)

The starting point of this analysis is represented by the identification of tweets/posts by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Rishi Sunak (as of May 30, 2024). In particular, the timespan chosen focused on his tweets/post following his appointment as Prime Minister. A total number of six tweets/posts have been taken into account: five of them have been posted from Rishi Sunak’s personal Twitter/X account (@RishiSunak), while one of them has been posted by the official account of Downing Street (@10DowningStreet). Five tweets/posts have been retrieved in the period October 23 – October 28, 2022 and represent the tweets that Sunak (and Downing Street) posted following his appointment as new PM of Britain. Only one tweet/post referred to a subsequent period (December 10, 2022) and involves Sunak’s private life. Every tweet/post has been analysed as a standalone case, then they have been considered in an aggregated perspective. The institutional tweets/posts shall be referred to as CS+no. (Case Study 1 = CS1, and so on).

Comments to every CS have been exported using a dedicated tool. By means of a subscription-based tool available at *Exportcomments.com*, comments have been downloaded and aggregated as separate text instances. *Exportcomments.com* collects tweets/posts set as public, therefore this procedure complies with Twitter/X’s privacy policy according to which “Twitter is public and Tweets are immediately viewable and searchable by anyone”.<sup>47</sup> However, in the assessment process no personal information has been taken into consideration (e.g. names and/or nicknames, or location, if any) and examples of tweets/posts in the Discussion section are provided without mentioning such personal information. For each CS, the first 250 comments have been evaluated for this analysis. The number of comments for each CS has been considered adequate to provide an assessment of users’ reactions to the content posted by the newly appointed PM of UK. Comments have been sorted in chronological order, so that the most immediate (and possibly spontaneous) reactions to an institutional content could be gathered. Some comments have been left out since they did not meet some essential criteria:

- only comments in English have been considered;
- nested comments, that is sub-replies to a comment, have been excluded. As a matter of fact, a reply to a reply is likely to result in a new communication, generating new intentions and/or prosodies;
- unrelated comments, that is comment pertaining to other topics clearly not associated with Rishi Sunak, the UK, the political scene, etc., have been left out. This category may include bots and spam accounts.

<sup>45</sup> Mariza Georgalou, *Discourse and Identity on Facebook* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> Rita Faria, “Stance-Taking and Gender: Hateful Representations of Portuguese Women Public Figures in the NETLANG Corpus”, in Isabel Ermida, ed., *Hate Speech in Social Media: Linguistic Approaches* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 311-340.

<sup>47</sup> Twitter Privacy Policy, <https://x.com/en/privacy>.

- ambiguous content due to poor context has been excluded since a clear assessment in terms of sentiment was not possible.

To assess the kind of engagement in response to CSs, each comment has been labelled as Positive (P) or Negative (N) for quantitative analyses (tool used: Notepad++). Responses providing supporting statements (e.g. congratulations, salutes, etc.) towards Sunak, Sunak's political party and/or the new government have been labelled as positive. Responses falling into the category of derogatory, offensive, hateful, critical opinions towards Sunak, Sunak's political party and/or the new government have been labelled as Negative. The assessment has been carried out manually, since quantitative and qualitative results may be more precise. As Van Atteveldt *et al.* pointed out in their comparison of methodologies to assess content on SM environments, "for smaller tasks it might be better to just use manual coding on a sufficiently large sample".<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, due to poor context, even automatic trained systems could fail in recognising the *real* intention of a comment since other variables are involved (such as irony and sarcasm) that make sentiment analysis a challenging task.<sup>49</sup>

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Description of Case Studies (CSs)

Case Study 1 (CS1) is the first tweet/post by Rishi Sunak after being appointed as new leader of the Conservative Party, and consequently as the new Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Posted on October 22, 2022, it had considerable engagement (18K+ comments, 13.8K+ reposts/citations, and 76.9K+ likes as of May 30, 2024). Considering that the peculiarity of Twitter/X lies in sharing short posts (the platform has been characterised by posts up to 140 characters, then extended to 280<sup>50</sup>), the short textual message sticks to the specific feature of the medium chosen; at the same time, a longer text in the form of a picture (the so-called text to photo) is provided too.

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<sup>48</sup> Wouter van Atteveldt et al., "The Validity of Sentiment Analysis: Comparing Manual Annotation, Crowd-Coding, Dictionary Approaches, and Machine Learning Algorithms", *Communication Methods and Measures*, 15.2 (2021), 121-140.

<sup>49</sup> Vishal Kharde and Sheetal S. Sonawane, "Sentiment Analysis of Twitter Data: A Survey of Techniques", *International Journal of Computer Applications*, 139.11 (2016), 5-15.

<sup>50</sup> Note: Only verified, subscription-based accounts could write up to 10,000 character per tweet/post.



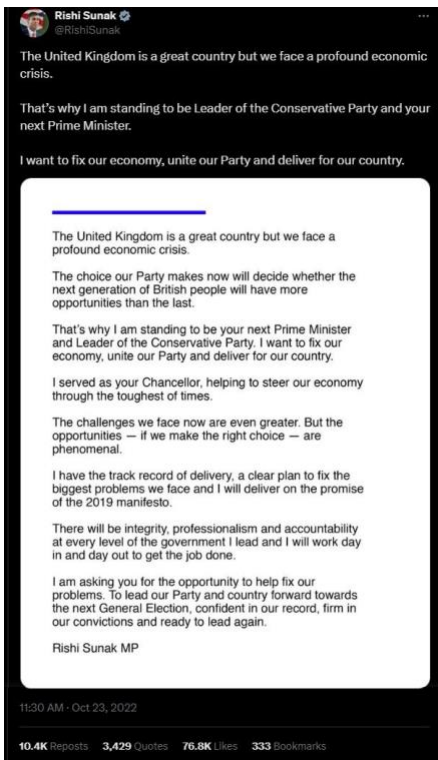


Figure 1. The tweet/post referring to CS1

Case Study 2 (CS2) refers to Sunak’s first formal speech as new PM at Downing Street, on October 25, 2022. In terms of passive and active engagement, the tweet/post had 15K+ comments, 23.5K+ reposts/citations, and 160K+ likes as of May 30, 2024. This is an example of multimodal post, as a short text (*I will work day in and day out to deliver for you. Watch my speech from Downing Street*) is accompanied by the video of Sunak’s speech. It is also interesting to highlight the use of an emoji, a visual cue used in many online environments with different tenors<sup>51</sup> and discursive implications,<sup>52</sup> depicting a hand pointing down with the index finger (👉). This element is used as visual indicator to interconnect the text and the video, guiding users towards the sequence of use of the tweet/post.

<sup>51</sup> Christa Dürscheid, “Emojis Are Everywhere: How Emojis Conquer New Contexts”, in Yannis Haralambous, ed., *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century: Proceedings Grapholinguistics and Its Applications*, vol. 4 (Brest: Fluxus Editions, 2020), 501-512.

<sup>52</sup> Susan C. Herring, “The Co-evolution of Computer-mediated Communication and Computer-mediated Discourse Analysis”, in Patricia Bou-Franch and Pilar Garcé-Conejos Blitvich, eds., *Analysing Digital Discourse: New Insights and Future Directions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 25-67.

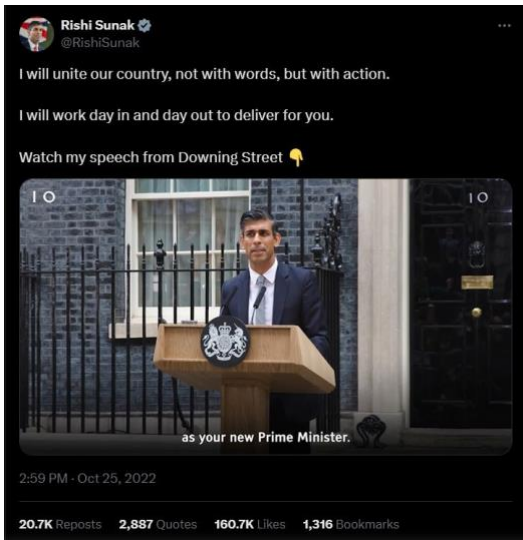


Figure 2. The tweet/post referring to CS2

Case Study3 (CS3) is a tweet/post by Rishi Sunak after his first meeting at the Cabinet on October 26, 2022. In terms of engagement, the tweet/post shows less interactions (4.4K+ comments, 2.8K+ reposts/citations, and 40K+ likes as of May 30, 2024). Multimodality is enacted by means of a picture of the PM while meeting the other members of the Cabinet.



Figure 3. The tweet/post referring to CS3

Case Study 4 (CS4) is a tweet/post by Rishi Sunak on October 28, 2022, in which the text (*Together we can achieve incredible things. Now let’s get to work*) “certifies” the beginning of his mandate as PM. The content recalls a sort of “promotional” intention as the video accompanying the text offers a rapid

overview of Sunak’s earliest days as the incumbent Prime Minister. The same emoji observed in CS2 (👉) acts as a connection between the textual and the visual part. In terms of engagement, the tweet/post has a considerable amount of passive reactions (73.5K+ likes) while active engagement is less vivid (7.8K+ comments and 7.2K+ reposts/citations as of May 30, 2024).

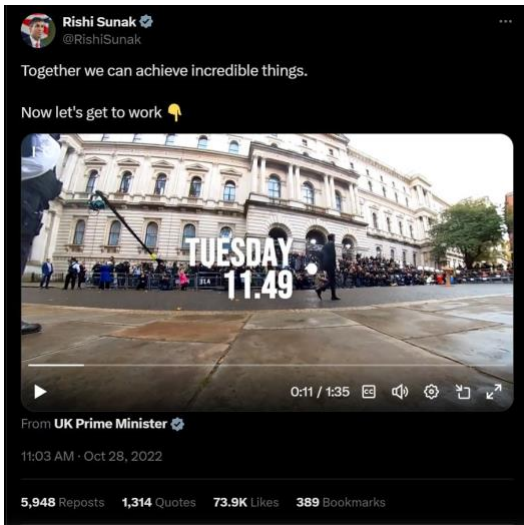


Figure 4. The tweet/post referring to CS4

Case Study 5 (CS5) is a tweet/post issued by the official account of Downing Street on the same day as CS4 (October 28, 2022) and recalls its same visual content. Compared with Sunak’s personal account, engagement is less relevant notwithstanding the same content provided synchronously (4.5K+ comments, 2.9K reposts/citations, and 15K+ likes as of May 30, 2024).

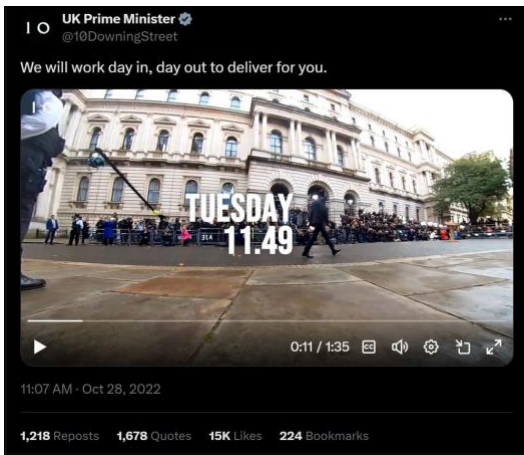


Figure 5. The tweet/post referring to CS5

Case Study 6 (CS6) is a tweet/post by Rishi Sunak ahead of a football match between England and France for the World Cup 2022 quarter finals on December 10, 2022. Though involving the same person,

this content is distant in terms of time and topic but it has been chosen to compare the assessment-related results obtained for CS1 to CS5 with an out-of-context message that somehow involves the relationship between the Prime Minister and his addressees. In terms of engagement, the tweet/post is consistent with the political-based ones (5.5K+ comments, 3.5K+ reposts/citations, and 63.7K+ likes as of May 30, 2024).



Figure 6. The tweet/post referring to CS6

### 6.2 CSs’ Sentiment: Assessment of Comments to Institutional Tweets/Posts

As stated in the methodology section, for each CS 250 valid comments in chronological order have been gathered and assessed in order to evaluate the general sentiment of the “digital electorate” towards the newly appointed Prime Minister. The following table summarises the results obtained on a case-by-case basis:

Case study (CS) no.	Number of comments analysed	No. of positive comments	No. of negative comments	% of positive comments	% of negative comments
CS1	250	35	215	14%	86%
CS2	250	190	60	76%	24%
CS3	250	44	206	18%	82%
CS4	250	107	143	43%	57%
CS5	250	4	246	2%	98%
CS6	250	9	241	4%	96%

Table 1. Results of the assessment process (positive vs. negative comments) on a case-by-case basis

The following table shows the results on an aggregated basis, highlighting the mean percentage of positive vs. negative comments:

Overall CSs	Overall no. of comments analysed	Overall no. of positive comments	Overall no. of negative comments	Mean % of positive comments	Mean % of negative comments
CS1-CS6	1500	389	1111	26.17%	73.83%

Table 2. Results of the assessment process (positive vs. negative comments) on an aggregated (CS1 to CS6) basis

## 7. Discussion

Results are assessed and discussed as standalone cases, then in an aggregated perspective. This allows for a distinction among the different tweets/posts in case of discrepancies in the sentiment-related results; at the same time, each tweet/post gives its contribution in providing a more comprehensive result that could explain the general attitude of common people or users towards a divisive topic and/or the political élites. The first empirical evidence that emerges from the case-by-case comparison is that a negative sentiment overcomes a positive attitude in five cases out of six. Positive comments are generally overwhelmed by negativity, and there are only a few spaces for continuity of positivity that can provide support to the original, institutional message. Apart from CS2, the only one with a majority of positive comments, only CS4 shows a balanced situation (43% positive comments, 57% negative comments) while CS1, CS3, CS5 and CS6 show a disproportionate percentage of negativity (average value: 90.5%). This means that only one out of ten comments shows support for Rishi Sunak, his government and/or his political party.

Evidence from this data shows that the impact of negative comments following an institutional content is like a vicious circle, since an early bulk of disrespectful comments (especially in “the heat of the moment”, soon after a tweet/post is issued) may trigger other users to act likewise, making positive comments less relevant and less likely to elicit similar attitudes. This behaviour is confirmed by other studies, according to which it is easier to show “out-party animosity (rather than increasing in-party warmth).<sup>53</sup> Though interpreted differently by online users, comments do have a role in influencing the general perception of a SM content associated with a personality, especially when dealing politics and/or politicians.<sup>54</sup> Positivity is rarely perceived, and when present tends to be impoverished due to some patterns of repetition that seem to lack authenticity or is perceived to be less impactful.<sup>55</sup> The analysis of the bulk of comments in CS2, the only one with a majority of positive comments, seems to confirm this hypothesis. Positive comments are almost all expressed as “bare” congratulations, sometimes accompanied by an emoji with a supportive meaning (e.g. hearts, clapping hands, smiling faces, flowers, etc.), and not as sympathetic comments in the form of structured sentences towards Sunak and/or the political consequences of his appointment. This may suggest the fact that these positive language acts could be the result of an automatized process of non-human accounts (the so-called “bots”), which act on the basis of a pre-arranged prompt. As a matter of fact, most of the positive accounts have Indian-sounding names and/or account names, along with a flag of India in their profile names and/or in their comments. Several comments also add “happy Diwali” along with the message of congratulations: this is a reference to a popular festival celebrated by the Hindu community at the end of October/early November, a period consistent with the timespan of the tweet/post by Sunak. Furthermore, an analysis

<sup>53</sup> Steve Rathje et al., “Out-group Animosity Drives Engagement on Social Media”, *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*, 118.26 (2021), 10.1073/pnas.2024292118

<sup>54</sup> Saerom Lee et al., “How People Perceive Malicious Comments Differently: Factors Influencing the Perception of Maliciousness in Online News Comments”, *Front. Psychol.* 14:1221005 (2023), 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1221005.

<sup>55</sup> Andrea K. Bellovary et al., “Left- and Right-Leaning News Organizations Use Negative Emotional Content and Elicit User Engagement Similarly”, *Affect Sci*, 2.4 (2021), 391-396.

of several accounts who commented the original tweet/post revealed that they are “dead” accounts, that is accounts of users with no content of any kind.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, negativity is expressed more explicitly, in various forms. Derogatory and insulting terms and expressions are quite commonly found, but at the same time many users hold against Sunak personally, as they refer to some of the above-mentioned “labels” he has had since he took the political field. Some of them mock his name (with many examples of “*Fishy*” or “*Dishy*” instead of Rishi), while others refer to his Punjabi origin (“*You may be the good economist. But not English. Not brought up with British values. Britain to have you as PM??!! Where is Britain heading to??!!*”| “*Not even English*”| “*Go back to India*”) or his status as politician (“*He only wants the job to get richer and help out his posh job friends, I hope he falls miserably*”). Other comments refer to his personal life, in particular to an alleged accusation of tax fraud involving him and his family (“*Tax dodger*”| “*You paying your taxes now?*”| “*Has your family started paying their taxes yet?*”| “*First ask your wife to pay her taxes without hiding behind non dom, while enjoying all perks funded by British taxpayers*”). Other comments deride Sunak’s verbal and non-verbal behaviours: a particular case is represented by a consistent use of the verb *to deliver* (*I will work day in day out to deliver for you/ Deliver for the whole United Kingdom*) or the related noun *deliver* (*I have the track record of delivery...*). Given the polysemy of the lemma *deliver*, users mock such use by referring to it as a synonym for *send* (“*When I next need to send a letter or parcel I will think of you*”| “*You couldn’t deliver a letter*”| “*Deliver what? Takeaways? Online groceries? Clothes? We don’t need you to deliver (whatever the heck you mean by that). We need you to govern [...]*). Other forms of negativity are context-dependent: an example is represented by several comments referring to Gary Glitter, an English former singer. One of the video posted in the tweets/posts (CS5) seems to have a background theme by Glitter, therefore users remarked upon this detail. Negativity is here inferred indirectly, as Gary Glitter has been accused of sexual misconduct and indecent assault, and sentenced to 16 years in prison. Therefore, the music theme chosen is a negative reference to Sunak and/or his government or his political party due to the negative reputation attributed to the English singer by online users (“*Gary Glitter!! Really*”| “*Is Gary Glitter the only musical act willing to be associated with the Tories? Did you stop to consider that his music might be an inappropriate choice?*”| “*Eww a Gary glitter soundtrack! Your PR is as out of touch as your whole cabinet! Muppets*”| “*I suppose the Tories have history with paedophiles Jimmy Saville Gary Glitter now? Tasteless*”| “*Using GARY GLITTER music in your video, says it all*”| “*Gary Glitter will be mortified to be linked to this government. It will surely damage his reputation*”). Other forms of negative comments include emojis as a standalone meaning-making practice (e.g. emojis representing the middle finger) or in combination with text and/or symbols to get a meaningful, insulting word (e.g. “*Tw@*”, with @ being pronounced as “at” recreates the insult *Twat*; or “*Little w* 🍷”, combining the sound of the word *anchor* with letter T to recreate the insult *wanker*).

CS6 is a particular case in point, since it refers to a non-political scenario; in a tweet/post issued on December 10, 2022, Sunak shows his support for the English national football team ahead of the 2022 World Cup match against France. The tweet/post includes the use of a tool-specific device, that is a hashtag (#threelions) to include his content in a common discursive context,<sup>57</sup> along with a picture of himself smiling at the camera while holding an England scarf above his head. This CS proved to be the one with the most overwhelming negativity, as only 9 comments out of 250 are positive. Negativity here follows recurrent patterns (hateful comments because of his Indian or non-British origin; for this reason, users think that Sunak cannot support the English National Team (“*Not even English*”| “*You’re Indian mate :/*”| “*Curse of this indian PM of England| India is better than England* 😏 | “*Your India buddy| R u british?!!!!*) or to underline his alleged opportunism in non-political contexts, as in the case of football

<sup>56</sup> Similar phenomena have been witnessed in other social media such as Instagram. See a discussion on [Reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com).

<sup>57</sup> Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk: Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

(“Prime Minister of UK or England? Will see him to do this for Scotland or Wales in any tournament?”| Every time you see a Tory using an England game as a photo opportunity, you know we’ve lost before a ball has been kicked.| Pahahaha! Man who has American citizenship and all of his holding held offshore, is an England fan. Stop. I can’t breathe.), thus proving that his digital reputation is undermined in both professional and personal settings.

## 8. Final Remarks

This study tried to demonstrate that in SM contexts negativity, in the form of comments to a tweet/post, can undermine the reach of the original content, especially when issued by accounts of the so-called *Establishment*. In a 2019 study, Clementson analysed the impact of comments to politics-related contents, finding out that users were influenced by the nature of such replies, thus affecting the perception of an original content.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Shi et al. claimed that “it is no longer possible to consider the influence of news or other messages in the public information environment apart from the comments which follow them”.<sup>59</sup> When it comes to politics, discussion proves to be quite divisive and polarised, even though negativity tends to prevail. This study, in particular, showed that in a series of six tweets/posts issued by the newly appointed Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the reaction of his “digital electorate” is mostly negative as almost three out of four comments (73.83% in an aggregated perspective) have been assessed as negative, with peaks of almost complete negativity (96% of negative comments in CS6). The impact of comments from common users as a reaction to institutional messages in digital and online environments can be a marker in terms of the general opinion towards politics,<sup>60</sup> which may differ from traditional, face-to-face affiliation processes even though similar forms of manipulation are used in these contexts, too.<sup>61</sup> In SM contexts, people/users do not care about Sunak’s institutional role and tend to voice their non-affiliation towards him. This represents a break in the SNS-based circuit, according to which *followers* (like devotees of a political idea in real life environments) should be considered supporters – and not denigrators – of a given account. In many cases, a tweet/post is only the starting point or the triggering reason to post hateful, offensive or discreditable reactions. The data analysed confirm the fact that negative utterances are more likely to be associated with divisive topics such as politics,<sup>62</sup> especially in social networking platforms.<sup>63</sup> Though the analysis considered a limited dataset (250 comments per each Case Study), the study showed that responses based on negativity and hate could affect the reach of institutional messages, as well as they can crush the traditional affiliation and trust process between politicians and *their* (alleged) electorate. This also confirms Clementson’s idea according to which “comments sections are extremely powerful” in deflecting perceptions towards a topic and/or a public figure.<sup>64</sup> The negative trend observed in the dataset seems to confirm evidence from Hsueh et al., who claimed that biased comments could influence

<sup>58</sup> David E. Clementson, “How Web Comments Affect Perceptions of Political Interviews and Journalistic Control”, *Political Psychology*, 40.4 (2019), 815-836.

<sup>59</sup> Rui Shi et al., “Effects of Online Comments on Smokers’ Perception of Antismoking Public Service Announcements”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19 (2014), 975-990.

<sup>60</sup> Raviv Cohen and Derek Ruths, “Classifying Political Orientation on Twitter: It’s Not Easy!”, *Proceedings of the Seventh International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (2013), 91-99.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Rogers and Sabine Niederer., eds., *The Politics of Social Media Manipulation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

<sup>62</sup> Armend Duzha et al., “Hate Versus Politics: Detection of Hate Against Policy Makers in Italian Tweets”, *SN Social Sciences*, 1.223 (2021), 10.1007/s43545-021-00234-2.

<sup>63</sup> Xiaoyu Bai et al. “RuG @ EVALITA 2018: Hate Speech Detection in Italian Social Media”, in Tommaso Caselli, ed., *EVALITA Evaluation of NLP and Speech Tools for Italian: Proceedings of the Final Workshop 12-13 December 2018, Naples* (Torino: Accademia U.P., 2018), 245-249.

<sup>64</sup> Sara Freeman, “Social Media Comments Can Impact Perceptions”, *UGA Today*, Wednesday 26 February 2020, [www.news.uga.edu](http://www.news.uga.edu), accessed 1 May 2024.

readers' behaviours as the latter could follow a sort of "social norm and adjusted their immediate response".<sup>65</sup> Considering the analysis carried out in this study, Twitter/X proves to be a virtual space in which many forms of interactions and access are found. This platform, in particular, aims to guarantee (almost) absolute freedom of speech "without fear of censorship",<sup>66</sup> but this may favour a trend characterised by abundant negativity and disrespectful responses towards institutional figures, especially considering the fact that most accounts use pseudonyms and/or nicknames. Negativity is achieved by means of device-specific tools such as hashtags and retweets/reposts, but also a wise use of hashtags could reveal ideological intentions. There are some limitations to consider: a small and limited dataset has been taken into consideration, and the assessment did not take into account the relevance of such comments in terms of active and/or passive engagement (likes, retweets/reposts and/or bookmarks, and nested comments) to confirm the actual impact it had on users. At the same time, the sentiment-based quantitative assessment provided is a marker of the overwhelming negativity in response to the institutional tweets/posts analysed. Further research is strongly advised by considering the above-mentioned features along with other variables (e.g. investigating the same topic with different timespans; or considering the involvement of other stakeholders of the British political scene) or topics (e.g. religion, economy, sports, etc.) by resorting to the methodology used in this assessment study.

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<sup>65</sup> Mark Hsueh et al., "'Leave Your Comment Below': Can Biased Online Comments Influence Our Own Prejudicial Attitudes and Behaviors?", *Human Communication Research*, 41.4 (2015), 557-576.

<sup>66</sup> "Freedom of Speech, Not Reach: An Update on Our Enforcement Philosophy", *X Safety* (2023), [blog.x.com/en\\_us/topics/product/2023/freedom-of-speech-not-reach-an-update-on-our-enforcement-philosophy](https://blog.x.com/en_us/topics/product/2023/freedom-of-speech-not-reach-an-update-on-our-enforcement-philosophy).