

Deconstructing Brexit: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of the Language and Ideology of the Brexit Debate

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**Deconstructing Brexit: A Multimodal Critical Discourse
Analysis of the Language and Ideology of the Brexit
Debate**

Master's thesis

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Abstract

This paper critically investigates the use of Facebook advertisements by the Vote Leave campaign during the 2016 Brexit referendum through the lens of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). The paper aims to uncover how the campaign's strategic use of visual and textual elements might have influenced public opinion and voter behavior. Utilizing a theoretical framework that integrates concepts of discourse, ideology, and multimodality, the study analyzes a selection of targeted advertisements to understand the interplay of these elements. Furthermore, the research reveals that the Vote Leave campaign effectively leveraged emotional and ideological appeals to shape perceptions of the European Union, portraying it as a threat to British sovereignty, cultural identity, and economic stability. The combination of visual and textual elements successfully embedded the campaign's ideological messages within the public consciousness, potentially influencing the outcome of the referendum. The findings, for example, the frequent use of British cultural symbols to invoke a sense of nationalism and nostalgia, or the use of metaphors to reinforce the campaign's narrative, underscore the powerful role of digital political advertising in contemporary electoral processes and highlight the importance of critically examining such content to understand its influence on voter perceptions and behavior. This paper contributes to the broader understanding of how multimodal discourse shapes social realities and political outcomes.

Key words: Brexit, ideology, discourse, multimodality, critical discourse analysis, politics

1. Introduction

In the digital age, political campaigns have increasingly turned to social media platforms to sway public opinion. The 2016 Brexit referendum is a notable example, demonstrating how targeted political advertising on digital platforms, such as Facebook, might influence the outcome. The vote, which decisively led to the UK's decision to leave the European Union, was marked by vigorous campaigning that deepened divisions within the public. The use of social media not only facilitated widespread dissemination of information and misinformation but also intensified the polarization of public opinion, highlighting the powerful effect of digital platforms in modern political processes.

Notably, the Vote Leave campaign was particularly active in this context, utilizing various digital strategies to promote its viewpoints. These strategies included the strategic use of data analytics to target specific demographics, the deployment of emotionally charged content to engage users, and the frequent dissemination of controversial claims to fuel debate and virality of the content on the Internet. These tactics demonstrate the shifting landscape of political campaigning, where digital tools are increasingly significant in electoral processes.

The paper will establish a theoretical framework to clarify key concepts such as discourse, ideology, and multimodality, explaining how these elements interact. It will introduce the tools necessary for multimodal analysis, focusing on strategies that convey ideological meanings. Furthermore, by applying multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), this paper aims to unravel the complex ways in which the Vote Leave campaign employed language, images, and symbols to shape the discourse of EU membership, with a particular focus on issues of sovereignty, immigration, and national identity. It includes an analysis of a selection of the campaign's targeted advertisements, looking at how text, visuals, and the broader sociopolitical context were seamlessly integrated to promote specific ideological perspectives and create compelling narratives that aimed to influence voter behavior. Moreover, the paper outlines the objectives, methodology, and a discussion of the findings. The paper ends with a summary and critical evaluation of the main ideas and results.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, the focus will be on the theoretical framework involving Critical Discourse Analysis and multimodality, along with essential concepts from critical linguistics such as ideology and discourse. Furthermore, this chapter will discuss multimodal strategies used to imply ideological meaning along with the tools for a multimodal discourse analysis.

2.1. Discourse

Discourse encompasses all forms of written, spoken, or signed language that extend beyond individual sentences, forming cohesive and coherent structures that communicate more complex ideas. Blommaert (2005, 2) defines discourse “as a general mode of semiosis, i.e. meaningful symbolic behavior.” Furthermore, Fairclough and Wodak (1997, 258) argue that discourse is more than simple communication. It is fundamentally intertwined with social practices and influences. They describe it “as a form of ‘social practice’” and as such, it “implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it: The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them” (258). They further argue that through discourse, we build social identities, establish knowledge, and define our relationships. Discourse plays a dual role by maintaining the existing social order and also pushing for changes (ibid.). Essentially, the way we talk and write can support the way things are or help change them. Furthermore, discourse is powerful in terms of power dynamics. It can reinforce or challenge power relations among social classes, genders, and ethnic or cultural groups (ibid.). The way people and things are represented in language can either uphold or question existing power structures and ideologies, showing just how significant discourse is in shaping society (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 258). However, Verschueren (2012, 18) argues that “the ownership of the means of persuasive rhetoric is unequally distributed in most societies.” Moreover, he claims that both language use and discourse are regarded as a manifestation of ideology since they are unquestionably the primary tool for communicating complicated patterns of meaning (ibid.).

2.2. Ideology

According to van Dijk (2006, 728), the concept of ideology, although frequently discussed in the media and social sciences, is often characterized by its lack of clarity. Verschueren (2012, 8) notes that ideology, along with its expression through discourse, typically blends description with

prescription. This means it combines theories about how things currently are with theories about how they ought to be. These elements can be both explicitly and implicitly expressed, varying in their degree of visibility within the discourse (ibid.).

Additionally, van Dijk (2006, 728) points out that the term ideology is often used negatively to suggest a dichotomy, i.e., we possess the truth, while others hold misguided ideologies. This notion goes back to Marx and Engels, who saw ideology as a form of “false consciousness.” van Dijk (2006, 729) also adds that ideologies contribute to the legitimization of the abuse of power by dominant groups, and how the process of legitimization becomes especially effective when “the dominated groups” begin to view these dominant ideologies as natural or simply common sense. Moreover, he refers to Gramsci as he described this form of ideological control as “hegemony” in 1971 (ibid.).

When it comes to power, Machin and Mayr (2023, 42) argue that it stems from exclusive access to crucial social assets like educational opportunities, expertise, and financial means. This privileged access not only grants authority and status but also significantly increases the influence of those who hold it. As a result, these individuals or groups gain the capacity to dominate societal structures, and repress groups that are less advantaged, reinforcing their position of power within the social hierarchy, that is, hegemony. (ibid.)

Althusser (1971), who was among the first to characterize ideology as a discursive phenomenon, argued for another idea. He claims that ideology describes how particular viewpoints, as expressed in discourses, are propagated (or altered) by means of what are referred to as “ideological state apparatuses,” including the media, religious institutions, and the educational system. (as cited in Machin and Mayr 2023, 43)

Fairclough claims, referring to Gramsci (1971, as cited in Machin and Mayr 43), that while many institutions and forms of social organization undoubtedly reflect ideological interests, language is where we can see explicitly how these interests function. This is due to the fact that language is a typical social interaction that allows us to express our opinions on how the world functions, what seems to be natural and common sense. Ideas of our culture, nationalism, immigration, justice, and protecting the planet are among the concepts that we share through language. Institutions and people then utilize this language because of its seeming neutrality and common sense. (Machin and Mayr 43)

The ideas of common sense and normativity are central to the concept of ideology. “We can define as ideological any basic pattern of meaning or frame of interpretation bearing on or involved in (an) aspect(s) of social ‘reality’ (in particular in the realm of social relations in the public sphere), felt to be commonsensical, and often functioning in a normative way” (Verschueren 2012, 10). In his work, Verschueren (2012, 2) makes the argument that once ideas about how groups of people interact are viewed as normal, they can be effective instruments for the legitimization of worldviews, actions, and laws, despite the often unfavorable outcomes in terms of prejudice, dominance patterns, and even violence.

Verschueren (2012, 8) examines the prescriptive characteristics of ideology, noting its strong alignment with “a form of normativity” related to common sense. Initially, common-sense observations, which are mainly descriptive in nature, develop into established norms that outline both what is viewed as normal and what serves as regulatory and prescriptive guidelines. Moreover, he clarifies that this type of common sense is not a creation by individuals alone, it is a historical consensus, representing a shared understanding that members of a larger community use to strengthen the persuasiveness of their viewpoints and arguments. (ibid.) Furthermore, the fact that ideological meaning is seldom challenged “in a given society or community, in discourse related to the ‘reality’ in question, possibly across various discourse genres” is indicative of the commonsensical, that is normative, quality of ideological meaning (Verschueren 2012, 12).

2.3. Critical Discourse Analysis

The concept of “critical linguistics” was first introduced by Roger Fowler and his associates at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s. Their groundbreaking work *Language and Control* encapsulates the essence of this novel and demanding method of studying language at the time. Critical Linguistics, often regarded as the precursor of Critical Discourse Analysis, aims to show how grammatical and semantic forms may be ideological tools for constructing meaning in texts as well as for classifying and categorizing objects, people, and events (Simpson, et al. 2019, 58). However, Simpson and his co-authors (2019, 59) argue that while van Dijk, Fairclough and Wodak are often linked with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the field itself is not uniform. They note that critical discourse analysts frequently emphasize the diversity of approaches that constitute CDA.

Critical Discourse Analysis has similar goals to those of discourse analysis. Like text linguistics, it seeks to explain “the production, internal structure, and overall organization of texts.” However, it uniquely strives to incorporate a critical perspective into its theoretical and descriptive explanations of texts (Kress 1990, 84). The concept of “critical” language research is defined by Fairclough (1989, 5) as the analysis of linguistic components to uncover links between language, power, and ideology that are frequently concealed from the public (as cited in Machin and Mayr 2023, 16).

According to Wodak (2014, 302), CDA is an interdisciplinary study that is problem-oriented and encompasses a range of methods, each with its theoretical frameworks, strategies for research, and goals. Furthermore, Wodak and Meyer (2009, 4) state that Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) approaches have a collective goal, which is breaking down power dynamics and ideologies. This is done by studying various types of data, such as textual, verbal, or graphical. Moreover, researchers in this field are open about their own biases and motivations. Not only that, they have to continually and critically evaluate their research practices. (ibid.)

To add to this, all researchers are inevitably influenced by their environment and political ideologies, and it is important to recognize that their political views are not inherently more valid or truthful than others (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 7). Van Leeuwen (2006, 293) argues that identifying oneself as “critical” suggests adherence to superior ethical standards. It involves an intention to clearly articulate a researcher’s position, research interests, and values, as well as to provide complete clarity of their standards, without having to justify the evaluative perspective of their study (as cited in Wodak and Meyer 2009, 7).

It is important to add that the objects studied in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) do not have to be tied to negative or particularly serious social or political matters, which is a common misunderstanding of the objectives and the meaning of the term critical. Wodak (2014, 302) refers to Chilton and his colleagues (2010) and points to the fact that the term “critical” does not necessarily imply the notion of negative as it might in everyday use. She further argues that any social phenomenon can be subjected to critical analysis, challenged, and not merely taken for granted (ibid.). The term “critical” principally refers to the unraveling or “denaturalizing” of ideologies within discourse and exposing the construction of power structures through discourse (Simpson et al. 2019, 59-60).

Critical Discourse Analysis does not focus solely on a linguistic unit as such but instead examines social phenomena, which are inherently complex and hence entail “a multi/inter/transdisciplinary and multimethodological approach” (Wodak 2014, 302). According to Wodak and Meyer (2009, 2), CDS draw their multifaceted roots from a range of disciplines such as rhetoric, text linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, social psychology, cognitive science, literary studies, and sociolinguistics, in addition to applied linguistics and pragmatics. Aligned with its Critical Theory roots, CDS stresses the importance of interdisciplinary efforts to thoroughly understand how language shapes and disseminates knowledge, organizes social institutions, and exerts power (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 7).

2.4. Multimodality

Machin (2013, 347) claims that the field of linguistics embraced multimodality through the influential works of Kress and Van Leeuwen, specifically “Reading Images” (1996) and “Multimodal Discourse” (2001). In addition to the previously mentioned work, Ledin and Machin (2017, 61) also refer to Michael O’Toole’s “The Language of Displayed Art” (1994) as one of the integral books in the field of multimodality. They further explain that the considerable diversity between these books highlights the variations now common in the field of multimodality. However, Ledin and Machin (2017, 61) explain that they were all very much influenced by Michael Halliday’s work from 1978, “Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning”, which prioritized the social functions of language.

Ravelli (2018, 434) points out that multimodal texts are a common aspect of the contemporary communication landscape and adds that it is difficult to envision any communication in English that is not multimodal (as cited in Statham 2022, 167). Furthermore, Jancsary and his colleagues (2016, 183) argue that the quantity and quality of visual information we encounter has increased dramatically in the modern Western world. Machin (2013, 347) expands on this notion and highlights a key concept: texts studied by linguists generate meanings not only through language but also through visual elements like imagery, color, page layout, and even through material objects and architecture. Moreover, images, like written texts, serve experiential, social, and textual functions (Statham 2022, 189).

Jancsary and his colleagues (2016, 182) refer to Kress (2010, 79) who defines a “mode” as a semiotic resource used for creating meaning and shaped by social and cultural forces. His examples

of modes include visuals, text, design, melodies, body language, verbal communication, animations, and geometric objects, all of which are used in visualization and social interaction. The authors stress that it should be noted how Kress refers to a “mode” as a “resource,” as something that can be used to convey meaning. Communication then relies on the availability and appropriateness of these resources in a given social context. Furthermore, they state that within certain cultural realms, similar meanings may be conveyed through different modes. However, certain things are not always possible or suitable because cultural constraints limit both the number of resources that are accessible and their symbolic potential. Consequently, we might draw the conclusion that the use of multiple modes of communication is influenced by the norms, customs, and regulations set by culture and institutions, which dictate what is considered acceptable or not. However, within these parameters, individuals have significant flexibility in how they convey their messages (Jancsary et al. 2016, 182). Moreover, Jancsary and his colleagues (2016, 183) state that multimodal discourse analysis focuses on the various roles of each mode, as well as their interrelationships.

2.5. Strategies for conveying ideological meaning

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) studies the different modes in a media text and how they work together. It focuses on how visual strategies and lexical choices shape the representation of people and events. By examining these elements, MCDA uncovers the underlying ideologies and power dynamics in all kinds of media content, providing a deeper understanding of their influence on audience perceptions. The upcoming sections will provide a brief explanation of several main strategies for conveying ideological meaning, as discussed by Machin and Mayr (2023).

2.5.1. Lexical strategies for conveying ideological meaning

Examining the language at the lexical level is one method of dissecting manipulative strategies. Analyzing the text’s numerous lexical and grammatical components is required for this. One of the first lexical strategy that Machin and Mayr (2023, 59-60) mention is overlexicalization. It refers to the excessive use of specific terms or synonyms within a text. This strategy, which frequently aims to persuade or overemphasize specific arguments, can give a sense that something is problematic or has an ideological connotation.

Another important strategy by Machin and Mayr (2023, 38-40 and 62-63) is recontextualization. It involves taking elements from one specific context and placing them into another, thereby changing their meaning. This can include removing, simplifying, or altering certain aspects of an event or practice.

An additional strategy that functions in somewhat similar way is abstraction (Machin and Mayr 2023, 39 and 164). Abstraction reduces concrete details about an event or process, replacing them with generalizations or broader concepts. This selective presentation can conceal certain elements while emphasizing others, thus influencing the audience's understanding and interpretation in line with specific ideological perspectives. Through abstraction, the complexity and nuances of real-life situations are often simplified, which can serve to reinforce particular narratives and ideologies.

Metaphors are frequently used to communicate an ideological point of view. It is essentially the process by which we grasp one notion in relation to another, often projecting familiar experiences onto more complicated, that is, conceptual and abstract ideas (Machin and Mayr 2023, 234). "Metaphors can be quite deliberately persuasive, particularly when used in political discourse" (235). We frequently overlook metaphors because they are so common to us. However, they carry with them a variety of attributes, emphasizing certain aspects while hiding others (237).

Another strategy that Machin and Mayr (2023, 68-71) discuss is structural opposition. It relies on creating implicit contrasts between opposing concepts such as good/bad, civilized/uncivilized, or modern/traditional. These contrasts are often used to imply ideological stances without overt statements. Furthermore, Van Dijk (1998, as cited in Machin and Mayr 2023, 168) asserts that these structural opposites result in "ideological squaring," which is characterized by a significant divide between "us" and "them".

Other prominent grammatical strategies listed in Machin's and Mayr's 2023 work that imply ideological meaning include nominalization, modality, verb transitivity, the use of passive voice, and quoting verbs.

Nominalization serves as one of the key ideological tools to obscure agency and responsibility (Machin and Mayr 2023, 196). In addition to nominalization, the passive voice and verb transitivity are used to either spotlight or conceal the actions of certain participants, addressing the dynamics

of who performs actions and who is affected by them. As to quoting verbs, they are verbs used to describe how someone speaks, which can carry evaluative connotations. For example, using “whined” instead of “said” to describe someone’s speech implies a negative evaluation of the speaker’s attitude or character. This subtle linguistic choice can influence how readers perceive the credibility or emotional state of the speaker (Machin and Mayr 2023, 86).

Modality refers to the use of modal verbs and other linguistic elements to express degrees of certainty, obligation, or permission (Machin and Mayr 2023, 272). Modality can indicate a speaker’s commitment to the truth of a statement or their attitude toward the likelihood of an event. For instance, “must” suggests a strong obligation, while “might” indicates a possibility. High modality can assert certainty and authority, whereas low modality can introduce doubt and flexibility. Modality can be employed ideologically to convey a sense of inevitability or to question the validity of certain actions or events. Moreover, Fairclough (1992 and 2003, as cited in Machin and Mayr 2023, 272) explains that modality encompasses any linguistic element that conveys the speaker’s or writer’s personal perspective or commitment to their statements. This can be achieved “through hedging, modal verbs, modal adjectives, and their adverbial counterparts.” Furthermore, Machin and Mayr (2023) argue that mood should also be considered in this context because it is related to modality, showing how intentions are encoded in verb forms. This pertains to actions like providing information, issuing commands, or making requests.

2.5.2. Visual strategies for conveying ideological meaning

When we look at the lexical choices used to describe something or someone, we analyze how individuals, groups, behavior, processes, and context are construed. We pose the same questions regarding visual semiotic choices when conducting MCDA. Visual communication is a powerful tool in shaping public perception and creating specific narratives. By examining visual semiotic resources, we can uncover the implicit meanings and ideologies embedded within images. Machin and Mayr (2023) list several visual strategies including visual modality, visual transitivity, metaphor, salience, gaze, and the representation of social actors.

Visual modality pertains to the degree of realism in an image, ranging from high modality, which is rich in detail and naturalistic colors, to low modality, characterized by abstraction and simplification. High modality images, such as detailed photographs, create a sense of authenticity and are often used in contexts where credibility is crucial. In contrast, low modality images,

commonly found in advertisements, use simplified forms and bright, uniform colors to convey idealized messages quickly (Machin and Mayr 2023). By analyzing visual modality, one can discern how images are crafted to influence viewers' perceptions, with high modality lending seriousness and legitimacy to narratives, while low modality simplifies complex issues for easier consumption.

Machin and Mayr (2023) discuss salience as a crucial element in visual communication. Salience refers to how certain elements in an image are designed to attract attention and convey importance. This can be achieved through various strategies, such as foregrounding or backgrounding, using brighter colors, or positioning elements in distinct positions. Specific components can be given different levels of prominence to grab attention and build hierarchies of importance within the image. For instance, a political advertisement might use a bright, centrally placed image of the candidate to draw attention and emphasize their significance, while other elements remain less prominent. By analyzing salience, we can understand the intended focus of the image and the ideological messages communicated through the prominence of certain features over others.

Visual transitivity involves examining who is represented as the actor, as well as the actions they are performing and who or what is affected by these actions. This analysis reveals power dynamics and social roles within a narrative (Machin and Mayr 2023). For instance, in media coverage of protests, portraying police officers as active agents managing a crowd can imply authority and control, whereas depicting protestors as active agents highlights resistance and anarchy. By analyzing transitivity, one can uncover how images construct social roles and relationships, subtly guiding viewers' understanding of events and interactions.

Furthermore, gaze in visual communication is pivotal in shaping the viewer's engagement with images. According to Machin and Mayr (2023, 102), drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), images can fulfill the roles of "demand" and "offer." A "demand image" is created when the subject looks directly at the viewer, establishing a form of visual address that acknowledges the viewer's presence and elicits an emotional response or engagement. This direct gaze is akin to someone addressing us in social interaction, requiring some kind of response. In contrast, an "offer image" occurs when the subject looks away from the viewer, presenting the subject as information for the viewer to observe and contemplate without demanding a direct response. The metaphorical

associations of gaze direction are also significant. For example, upward gazes often convey hope or aspiration, while downward gazes suggest introspection or submission.

The representation of social actors involves analyzing how individuals and groups are depicted in images, focusing on aspects like individualization versus collectivization and generic versus specific depictions (Machin and Mayr, 2023, 134). Individualization portrays people as distinct individuals, often evoking empathy and personal connection, while collectivization depicts people as part of a homogeneous group, reducing personal identification. Generic depictions rely on stereotypes and typification, which can reinforce preconceived notions about certain groups. By analyzing these representations, one can uncover how images reinforce or challenge social stereotypes and power dynamics. (ibid.)

Together, these elements provide a framework for analyzing how images communicate and reinforce ideological messages. Through critical analysis of these visual strategies, we can uncover the subtle ways media shapes public perception, reinforces societal norms, and sustains power structures. This multimodal approach to critical discourse analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the crucial role of visual communication in shaping ideologies and social realities.

3. Research

This analysis will explore a selection of Facebook advertisements from the Vote Leave campaign through the lens of multimodal critical discourse analysis. By examining the combination of textual elements, visual imagery, and contextual factors, this study seeks to uncover the persuasive techniques and underlying ideologies aimed at shaping public opinion during the Brexit referendum. The goal is to understand how these ads addressed topics such as sovereignty, immigration, and national identity, as well as how they were designed and constructed to influence voters to support leaving the European Union.

3.1. Methodology

The methodology for this analysis involved collecting data from the UK Parliament's website, where the ads were provided by Facebook in July 2018 as part of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Committee's inquiry into Fake News. The analysis will be primarily based on the framework established by Machin and Mayr (2023), incorporating their principles of

multimodal critical discourse analysis to dissect the interaction of textual and visual elements within these advertisements. Additionally, the study will integrate free interpretation based on common knowledge. The analysis aims to identify the strategies used to convey ideological messages and influence public opinion, particularly in the context of the Brexit referendum, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how the Vote Leave campaign utilized multimodal techniques to shape voter perception and behavior. Following the analysis, a discussion will summarize the findings and relate them to the theoretical framework.

3.2. Multimodal analysis of Vote Leave ads posted on Facebook



Figure 1. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

The first example of an advertisement from the Vote Leave campaign employs a range of visual and textual elements to persuade viewers of the potential dangers of remaining in the EU. The image prominently features the EU flag, but it is depicted with severe cracks, symbolizing fragmentation and instability within the union. This visual metaphor suggests that the EU is on the verge of collapse, and by implication, the addition of new member states such as Turkey, Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro, is contributing to this perceived disintegration.

The accompanying text reinforces this message by asserting that these countries are joining the EU, presented as an inevitable and alarming development. The use of capital letters and bold font for the names of the countries emphasizes the perceived threat and significance of this expansion. This is further amplified by the rhetorical question, “Will this hurt the UK?” which is designed to prompt viewers to consider the negative implications for Britain. Furthermore, the red alert symbol

beside the text heightens the urgency and sense of danger. The color red, commonly linked to warnings and emergencies, aims to elicit an emotional reaction from the audience.

Additionally, the ad includes interactive elements, a red thumbs down and a green thumbs up, inviting viewers to engage with the message and express their opinions. The color coding of these buttons, with red indicating danger and green suggesting safety, subtly guides viewers toward a negative perception of the situation. This interactivity not only engages the audience but also reinforces the binary choice presented by the campaign to either support Brexit to avoid the risks associated with EU expansion or to face potential harm by staying.

Most importantly, the ad recontextualizes the reality of EU accession processes. In reality, Turkey, Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro are far from meeting the stringent criteria required for EU membership, and their accession is neither imminent nor guaranteed. However, the ad presents this potential expansion as a certainty, suggesting it will happen sooner rather than later. This strategic framing capitalizes on fears of uncontrolled migration and economic instability, creating a sense of urgency that may not align with actual, more gradual, and uncertain processes of EU expansion.

In the context of the Brexit debate, this ad plays on fears and uncertainties about the impact of the EU's expansion on the UK's social and economic stability. By highlighting countries that may be perceived as less economically stable or culturally different, the campaign taps into xenophobic and protectionist sentiments. The overall message is clear, leaving the EU is framed as a necessary step to protect the UK from the instability and potential threats posed by new EU members. This ad uses a combination of visual symbolism, emotive language, and interactive engagement to construct a compelling narrative in favor of Brexit.



Figure 2 and 3. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

The next example from the Vote Leave campaign presents two ads featuring healthcare professionals, a doctor, and a nurse, set against clinical backgrounds. These ads employ a multimodal approach to communicate a narrative of apprehension and disappointment about potential EU expansion. The focal point in both ads is a healthcare professional, looking downward with an expression that suggests concern or disapproval. This visual cue is significant, as it aligns with the negative presuppositions of the message. Furthermore, the choice of central figures is deliberate since doctors and nurses are trusted authorities, associated with care and expertise.

The main text about the expansion of the EU is same as in the previous example. The process of joining the EU is again recontextualized and simplified. However, the word “Seriously.” is set apart for emphasis, mirroring the medical professional’s disappointment and functioning as a rhetorical device to reinforce the gravity of the statement. Furthermore, the choice of the word “Seriously.” with its connotation of disappointment, invites skepticism and adds a nuanced layer to the discourse, suggesting that the message is not merely informational but a serious cause for concern, warranting immediate and critical attention from the viewer. Additionally, the use of red in the background of the word “Seriously” intensifies the emotional impact, as red is a color linked to warnings and alerts.

In these examples, the combination of disappointed authoritative figures, emotive language, and rhetorical device crafts a compelling narrative in favor of leaving the EU.



Figure 4. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

In another example from the Vote Leave campaign, we see a striking image designed to highlight the potential influx of immigrants to the UK. The ad prominently features a bold red background, which creates a strong visual salience, immediately catching the viewer's attention and conveying a sense of urgency and danger. Central to the image is a British passport, a powerful symbol of national identity and sovereignty, depicted with numerous footprints leading towards it. This visual metaphor suggests a potentially overwhelming influx of immigrants heading toward the UK. The image is characterized by low modality, relying on symbolic representation rather than realistic detail, which enhances its abstract and idealized quality, making the perceived threat more generalized and emotionally impactful.

The text, “5.23 MILLION more EU immigrants coming to the UK by 2030,” is presented in large, bold font, emphasizing the scale of immigration and aiming to shock the viewer with its volume. This figure recontextualizes and abstracts the complex issue of immigration into a single, alarming statistic, simplifying the nuanced reality of immigration flows. By specifying the year 2030, the ad frames this prediction as an imminent and pressing issue despite the speculative nature of such forecasts.

The phrase “It’s time for us to TAKE BACK CONTROL!” serves as a rallying cry, appealing to feelings of lost sovereignty and the desire for self-governance. The capitalized text and the exclamation mark enhance the urgency and imperative nature of the message. This slogan, central to the Brexit campaign, plays on public concerns about national control over borders and immigration policies.

By combining stark visuals with alarming statistics and emotive language, this ad constructs a narrative of threat and urgency. It appeals to protectionist and nationalist sentiments, suggesting that leaving the EU is the only way to regain control and safeguard the UK's future. This approach is designed to resonate deeply with voters' fears and uncertainties, reinforcing the Vote Leave campaign's overall message.



Figure 5. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

This particular ad from the Vote Leave campaign uses a compelling visual strategy to symbolize the potential influx of immigrants to the UK. The image portrays the outline of the UK formed by a densely packed crowd of people, set against a stark white background. This design choice immediately grabs attention and again conveys a sense of urgency and concern. The headline “5.23 MILLION more immigrants are moving to the UK!” is prominently displayed, with “5.23 MILLION” highlighted in red to amplify the alarm.

The ad further engages viewers by posing the rhetorical question “GOOD NEWS???” followed by “YES” and “NO” options in contrasting red and blue boxes, prompting the audience to consider and react to the message. The multiple question marks intensify the sense of doubt and skepticism, subtly implying that the influx of immigrants is not beneficial. Furthermore, the color coding of the “YES” and “NO” options also influence the viewer's perception, with red suggesting danger and negativity for “YES” and blue indicating calm and correctness for “NO.” This design choice prompts the audience to engage with the message and reinforces the campaign's broader strategy to evoke fear and concern about immigration, ultimately persuading viewers that leaving the EU is necessary to protect the UK's future.

The ad is characterized by low modality, using symbolic rather than realistic representation. The map of the UK formed by a mass of indistinguishable people is an abstraction that simplifies and amplifies the concept of mass immigration. This symbolic approach, lacking naturalistic detail, gives the image an idealized and urgent quality. The abstraction allows for a generalized depiction of immigrants, enhancing the emotional impact by presenting the situation as an overwhelming and immediate threat. Furthermore, the social actors are depicted as an indistinguishable mass of people, symbolizing the 5.23 million immigrants. This abstraction, that is, the process of collectivization, dehumanizes the immigrants, portraying them not as individuals with unique stories but as a less personalized group.

By using these rhetorical and visual strategies, the ad effectively dehumanizes immigrants through collectivization, presenting them as overwhelming mass. This approach simplifies the complex issue of immigration, making it emotionally impactful and aligning with the campaign's message that Brexit is essential for regaining control and safeguarding the nation. The ad's combination of symbolic imagery, alarmist language, and interactive elements crafts a compelling narrative designed to resonate deeply with voters' fears and uncertainties.



Figure 6. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

The next advertisement from the Vote Leave campaign presents an alarming image designed to evoke fear and urgency regarding Turkey's potential accession to the European Union. Central to the visual impact of the ad is a simplified map of Europe, where both the UK and Turkey are highlighted. A bold red arrow curves from Turkey towards the UK, visually suggesting a significant movement or influx. Moreover, the arrow, with its sharp and forceful design, evokes a sense of menace, reminiscent of imagery often used to depict invasions. The choice of red for this

arrow is deliberate. The color red here again symbolizes danger or warning, which in this context aims to evoke a sense of threat and immediacy.

Accompanying this visual is the stark text “TURKEY HAS A POPULATION OF 76 MILLION,” written in bold red and black. The emphasis on the large population size is intended to amplify the viewer’s perception of an impending overwhelming presence. The text continues with “TURKEY IS JOINING THE EU. GOOD IDEA???,” a rhetorical question that elicits doubt and fear about the implications of such an event.

The ad further directs the viewer’s response through the presentation of a binary choice of “YES” or “NO.” These options are colored red and blue, respectively. In this context, red aligns with the perceived threat, while blue, traditionally associated with calm and stability, suggests safety. This color coding subtly guides the viewer towards choosing “NO,” aligning with the campaign’s objective to sway public opinion against the EU.

Contextually, this advertisement taps into broader themes central to the Vote Leave campaign, particularly concerns about immigration and national sovereignty. By highlighting Turkey’s potential EU membership and its large population, the ad plays on fears of uncontrolled immigration and the loss of control over national borders. This aligns with the campaign’s overarching message of taking back control, suggesting that remaining in the EU would compromise the UK’s ability to manage its own immigration policies.

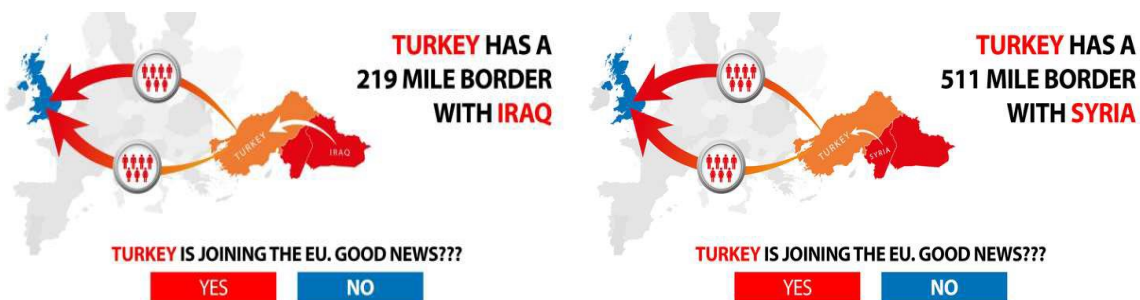


Figure 7 and 8. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

The additional advertisements from the Vote Leave campaign continue the strategy of invoking fear and urgency regarding Turkey’s potential accession to the European Union. These ads build on the previously analyzed themes but add new dimensions by highlighting Turkey’s borders with Iraq and Syria.

These advertisements tap into broader themes central to the Vote Leave campaign, particularly concerns about immigration and national sovereignty. By emphasizing Turkey's borders with Iraq and Syria, the ads play on fears of uncontrolled immigration from conflict zones and the associated security risks. The campaign's overall theme of regaining control is in line with this since it implies that the UK's capacity to regulate its own immigration laws would be undermined if it were to stay in the EU.

Moreover, these ads indirectly engage with cultural and racial anxieties by highlighting Turkey's borders with Iraq and Syria, countries associated with conflict and instability. This evokes a sense of cultural threat and taps into existing xenophobic sentiments and fears about cultural integration, further influencing the viewer's perception and decision-making. Turkey, with its predominantly Muslim population and its geographic position at the edge of Europe, is portrayed as a source of cultural threat, amplifying these anxieties and reinforcing negative stereotypes.

In sum, these advertisements effectively use multimodal elements to craft a persuasive and emotionally charged message. They encapsulate the Vote Leave campaign's strategy of leveraging fears and uncertainties about immigration and sovereignty, guiding the viewer towards a specific, intended response.



Figure 9. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

In another example from the Vote Leave campaign, a dramatic and culturally significant image is used to heighten fears about EU regulations intruding into everyday British life. In the focus is the image of a shattered tea kettle, its contents spilling across the floor, with EU flags displayed in the background. The broken kettle, a quintessential symbol of British culture and

tradition, serves as a potent visual metaphor for the perceived infringement of the EU on British domestic affairs.

Accompanying this striking image is the bold text “Now the EU wants to ban tea kettles!” written in white against a dark background. This statement is designed to provoke an emotional response, suggesting that the EU’s regulations are not only bureaucratic but also culturally insensitive and overreaching. The phrase taps into a deep-seated cultural anxiety, playing on the idea that cherished British customs and everyday conveniences are under threat from distant and out-of-touch EU lawmakers.

Moreover, the text is a hyperbolic claim designed to stoke fear and outrage. It simplifies and recontextualizes potential EU regulations into a direct attack on British culture, making the viewer more likely to react emotionally rather than rationally. This hyperbolic narrative is further supported by the urgent call to action “TAKE BACK CONTROL NOW,” which is designed to mobilize viewers into supporting the Brexit cause.

Furthermore, the call to action “TAKE BACK CONTROL NOW” is written in red, reinforcing the urgency and importance of the message. The red color amplifies the sense of immediate threat and aligns with the campaign’s broader strategy of invoking fear to motivate action. This slogan encapsulates the Vote Leave campaign’s core message, advocating for the UK to reclaim its sovereignty and protect its national identity from EU interference.

In context, this advertisement builds on existing themes of the Vote Leave campaign, such as sovereignty, control, and the preservation of British identity. It plays on the broader narrative that remaining in the EU means surrendering control over important cultural and domestic issues to a distant and unresponsive bureaucracy. By tapping into these anxieties, the ad aims to reinforce the necessity of leaving the EU to protect the British way of life.

In essence, this advertisement exemplifies the Vote Leave campaign’s strategy of leveraging culturally resonant symbols and emotionally charged rhetoric to shape public opinion. The multimodal elements, striking imagery, provocative text, and a bold call to action, work together to deliver a persuasive and urgent message aimed at swaying viewers toward supporting Brexit.



Figure 10. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

In another example, the Vote Leave campaign again intertwines quintessential British symbols with a potent visual metaphor to voice opposition to EU regulations. This advertisement features a giant teacup surrounded by iconic British symbols such as a red telephone box, a double-decker bus, and Big Ben. The tea bag inside the cup bears the Union Jack, further emphasizing the cultural significance of tea to British identity.

The advertisement features a tightly clenched blue fist as if ready to strike, marked with EU stars. Characterized by low modality, the fist appears less realistic but more symbolic, enhancing its impact as a threatening force. The fist symbolizes the perceived oppressive force of the EU, suggesting an imminent threat to British traditions and sovereignty. The fact that the fist is clenched evokes hostility and confrontation, implying that the EU's actions are both forceful and harmful.

The text, “THE EUROPEAN UNION WANTS TO KILL OUR CUPPA,” is prominently displayed and designed to elicit an emotional reaction. Furthermore, by using the colloquial term “cuppa,” the ad taps into everyday British life, suggesting that EU regulations threaten even the most cherished national traditions. This exaggerated claim is intended to provoke fear and concern among viewers. Moreover, a red “LEARN MORE” button is positioned beneath the statement, urging viewers to engage further with the campaign’s message. The choice of red again conveys urgency and importance, drawing immediate attention.

Overall, this ad exemplifies the Vote Leave campaign’s use of emotionally charged visuals and rhetoric to sway public opinion. By integrating relatable cultural symbols with alarmist text and a strong call to action, the ad effectively communicates its message, reinforcing the need for Brexit to protect British traditions and sovereignty.



Figure 11, 12 and 13. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

The next advertisements from Vote Leave also utilize a variety of multimodal strategies to influence public opinion, but this time, they highlight perceived abuses by EU politicians. These ads again prominently feature a combination of textual and visual elements that work together to create a persuasive narrative.

The first ad shows a private jet, which is overlaid with the EU flag. The text accuses EU politicians and bureaucrats of spending British taxpayers' money on private jets for short-distance travel, labeling this as an "outrageous abuse" that "MUST BE STOPPED." The use of the private jet imagery is a powerful visual metaphor for extravagance and waste, reinforcing the message of misuse of funds. Moreover, the EU flag superimposed on the image serves to directly associate this luxury with the EU, thereby constructing a negative representation of the institution. The call to action, "CLICK IF YOU AGREE," in a bold red button, is a strategic use of color to grab attention and incite immediate reaction from the viewer, fostering a sense of urgency and direct involvement.

The second ad shows a close-up of a limousine with the EU flag as a backdrop. The text follows a similar pattern, condemning the use of limousines by EU politicians, describing it as an

“outrageous abuse” of taxpayers’ money. The visual of the limousine, like the private jet, connotes luxury and privilege, further promoting the narrative of wastefulness and elitism. Moreover, the hand holding the car door open can be seen as a subtle symbol of servitude and entitlement, enhancing the contrast between the politicians’ affluence and the ordinary taxpayer’s reality. The repetition of the phrase “MUST BE STOPPED” across the ads creates a consistent and emphatic message, reinforcing the idea that immediate action is required to amend these injustices.

The third ad shows a close-up of British pound notes overlaid with the EU flag. The text claims that EU politicians receive £45k for expenses each year, in addition to their salaries, without the need to show receipts. By using the recognizable image and value of British currency, the ad highlights the extent of the alleged spending. This visual strategy effectively conveys the idea that a significant sum of money is being misused, making the accusation more relatable and impactful to the viewer. The choice of highlighting the exact figure of £45k adds specificity and credibility to the claim, making the accusation more tangible and impactful. As with the previous ads, the demand for action is clear and immediate, with the call to “CLICK IF YOU AGREE” again using red to draw attention and prompt action.

In all three ads, the superimposition of the EU flag serves to consistently link the criticized actions directly to the EU, framing the institution as the primary actor responsible for the alleged abuses. Furthermore, the visual strategy of using symbols of wealth and privilege (private jets, limousines, and large sums of money) supports the textual narrative of corruption and misuse of funds. The ads collectively work to construct a discourse that positions the EU as an extravagant and irresponsible entity, fostering a sense of urgency and outrage among the viewers. This multimodal approach effectively combines images and text to reinforce the campaign’s central argument and persuade the audience to support the Vote Leave cause.



Figure 14, 15, 16 and 17. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

The fourth ad features a large, luxurious cruise ship, again overlaid with the EU flag. The text claims that EU officials wasted nearly €3000 on luxury cruises with unlimited alcohol. The imagery of a grand cruise ship serves as another potent symbol of extravagance and excessive spending, reinforcing the narrative of misuse of funds by EU officials. Moreover, the mention of “unlimited alcohol” specifically adds a layer of moral indignation, suggesting not just financial waste but also indulgent, irresponsible behavior. This detail about unlimited alcohol aims to evoke a stronger emotional response from the viewer, painting a picture of EU officials not only spending excessively but also engaging in hedonistic activities. This combination of financial and moral accusations works to deepen the negative portrayal of the EU, making the viewer more likely to react with outrage and support the campaign’s call to action.

The fifth ad shows a man, presumably an EU official, getting into a chauffeured Mercedes, with the text highlighting that EU officials wasted €23,696 on chauffeured rides in Mercedes and Range Rovers. This ad again uses the imagery of high-end, luxury vehicles to suggest wastefulness and misuse of public funds. The visual reinforces the narrative of elitism and disconnect between EU

officials and ordinary taxpayers. The use of exact figures, €23,696 in this case, adds a layer of specificity and credibility to the claim, making it more impactful and believable.

The sixth ad depicts a serene, upscale golf course with the EU flag superimposed. The text accuses EU officials of wasting over €3000 on luxury golf in Ireland. The imagery of the pristine golf course serves to symbolize leisure and exclusivity, further painting EU officials as disconnected from the financial realities of ordinary citizens. This ad continues the pattern of using luxury symbols to critique the spending habits of EU officials, reinforcing the overall narrative of wastefulness and mismanagement.

The seventh ad shows a fine dining setting with gourmet food and wine, accompanied by the text claiming the EU wastes €176,782 on fine dining at exclusive restaurants. The use of an elegant dining scene reinforces the theme of luxury and excess, suggesting that EU officials are indulging in extravagant lifestyles at the expense of taxpayers. The substantial amount of €176,782 highlights the significant scale of the alleged misuse, aiming to provoke a strong reaction from the viewer. Furthermore, the choice of the specific figure €176,782, rather than a rounded number, adds an additional layer of credibility and precision, making the claim appear well-researched and factual. This exact number can evoke a sense of shock and disbelief, as it implies meticulous accounting and scrutiny, further enhancing the narrative of detailed oversight and significant waste. By incorporating such specific figures, the ad seeks to make the alleged extravagance more tangible and believable to the audience, thereby intensifying their sense of urgency and outrage.

In these four additional ads, the Vote Leave campaign continues to employ a multimodal strategy that combines evocative images with precise textual claims to critique the spending practices of EU officials. By consistently using symbols of luxury and specific monetary figures, these ads aim to reinforce the narrative that the EU is an irresponsible and extravagant institution. Moreover, each of these ads includes a “Learn More” button, which not only serves as a call to action but also suggests there is further evidence or information supporting these claims. This option to “Learn More” encourages viewers to engage deeper with the content, fostering a sense of informed outrage and further solidifying the campaign’s persuasive impact. By providing this additional layer of interactivity, the ads enhance their credibility and the urgency of their message, urging viewers to seek out more details and become more invested in the cause. This multimodal approach further strengthens the campaign’s central argument and persuades the audience to support Brexit.

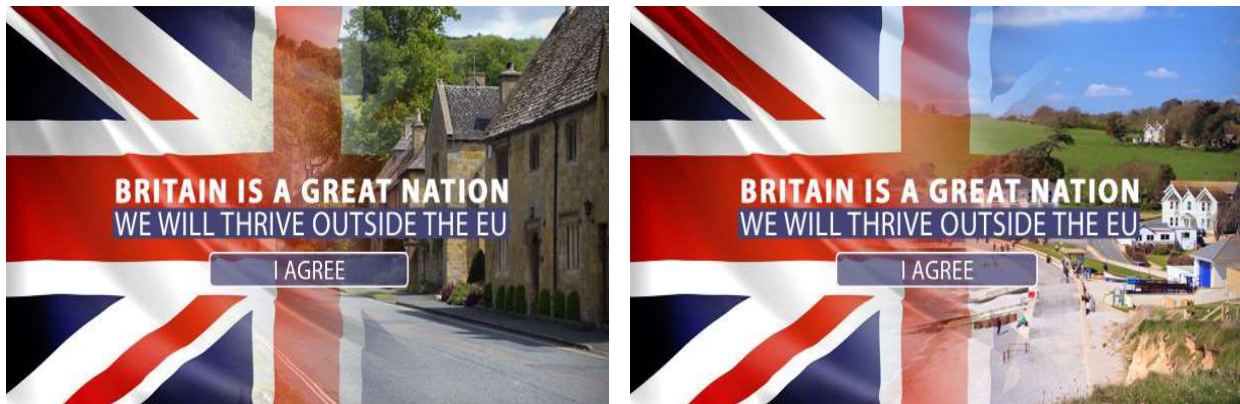


Figure 18 and 19. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

The next two ads take a different approach, focusing on national pride and the positive outcomes of leaving the EU. Both ads feature idyllic British landscapes with the Union Jack prominently overlaid, evoking a sense of patriotism and nostalgia. The first ad shows a picturesque British village, suggesting a serene and prosperous life in the UK. The text declares, “BRITAIN IS A GREAT NATION,” followed by “WE WILL THRIVE OUTSIDE THE EU.” This message is reinforced by the background image, which symbolizes traditional British values and the potential for a bright, independent future. The “I AGREE” button in a clear font encourages viewers to align with this vision of national success and autonomy. High visual modality is employed through the detailed and naturalistic depiction of the village, enhancing the sense of realism and authenticity. The high modality of the imagery suggests that this is a genuine representation of British life, reinforcing the ad’s message of thriving outside the EU.

The second ad presents a coastal scene, again with the Union Jack overlay and the same textual elements. The declaration of Britain’s greatness and the promise of thriving outside the EU are repeated, providing consistency and reinforcing the core message. The coastal landscape, associated with natural beauty and tranquility, serves to emphasize the idea of a self-sufficient, flourishing Britain. High visual modality is also evident here, with the detailed and realistic portrayal of the coast, enhancing the ad’s credibility and emotional appeal. The use of the phrase “I AGREE” continues to invite active participation and agreement from the audience, fostering a sense of unity and shared national purpose.

In both ads, the combination of patriotic imagery and bold declarations aims to evoke emotional responses of pride and confidence. By highlighting familiar and cherished British landscapes with high visual modality, these ads aim to strengthen viewers' identification with their nation and reinforce the belief that leaving the EU will allow Britain to reclaim its greatness.



Figure 20 and 21. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

The next two ads continue to focus on national pride and the positive outcomes of leaving the EU, and they also incorporate a high degree of visual modality to enhance their message. Both ads feature the London skyline with the Union Jack prominently overlaid, symbolizing economic strength and national pride. The first ad proclaims, “BRITAIN IS A GREAT NATION” and “WE WILL THRIVE OUTSIDE THE EU,” with an “I AGREE” button inviting viewer affirmation. The detailed and realistic depiction of the London skyline adds a high visual modality, making the scene appear authentic and credible. This use of high modality in the imagery suggests a genuine representation of Britain’s potential success and prosperity outside the EU, reinforcing the ad’s confident message.

The second ad presents a similar view of the London skyline but shifts the focus to economic strength with the statement, “WE ARE THE WORLD’S 5TH LARGEST ECONOMY,” followed by the rhetorical question, “DO WE REALLY NEED THE EU?” This is accompanied by “NO” and “YES” buttons, prompting viewers to engage directly with the message. Notably, the “NO” option is bolded, larger, and colored, while the “YES” option is grey and less emphasized, subtly suggesting the preferred answer and steering the audience towards a particular viewpoint. Moreover, the rhetorical question and the interactive buttons, with their biased presentation,

encourage the audience to question the necessity of the EU, framing the argument in terms of Britain's existing economic stature.

The strategic use of multimodal elements, along with the high modality in the visuals in the last four examples, effectively shifts the focus from criticizing the EU to celebrating British potential, thereby appealing to viewers' sense of national identity and optimism for the future.

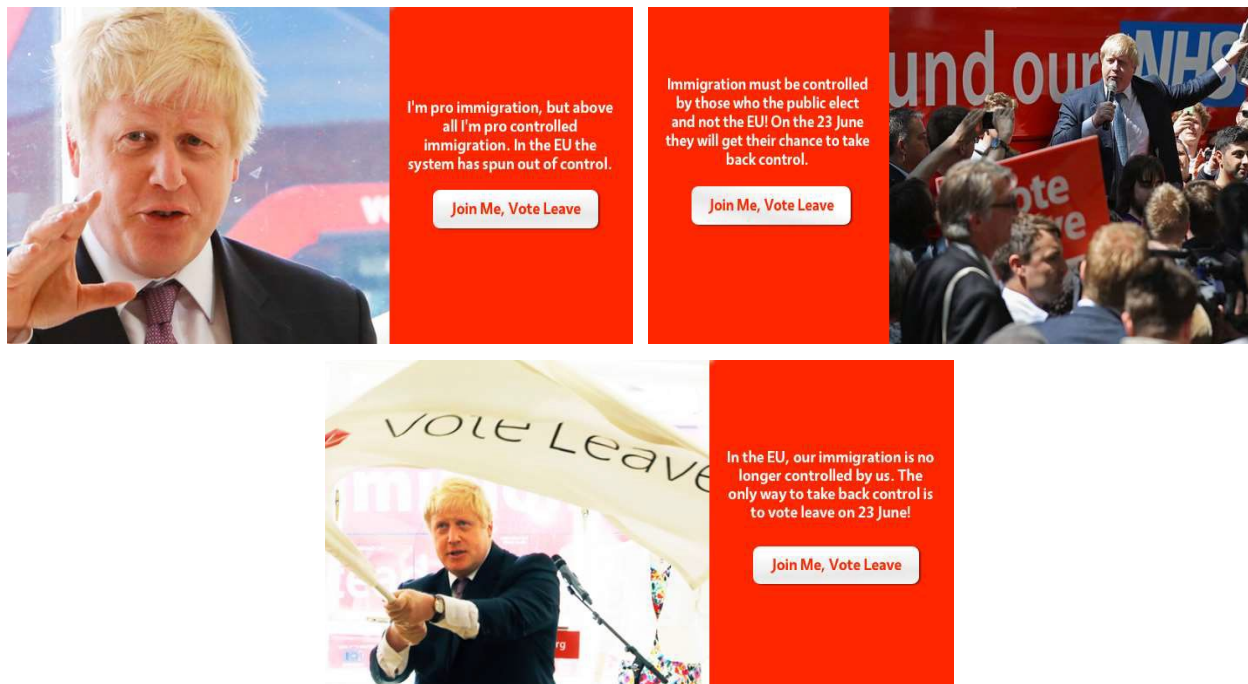


Figure 22, 23 and 24. (https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf)

The following three advertisements featuring Boris Johnson utilize a combination of visual and textual elements to convey persuasive messages aimed at supporting the Vote Leave campaign. These ads strategically blend high modality imagery with bold, assertive text to create a compelling narrative that emphasizes themes of immigration control, sovereignty, and leadership.

In the first ad, Boris Johnson is depicted in a mid-speech pose, engaging directly with the viewer through his gaze and hand gesture. The high modality of the image, with its realistic depiction of Johnson in a moment of expressive communication, aims to establish authenticity and credibility. The text beside him reads, "I'm pro immigration, but above all I'm pro controlled immigration. In the EU the system has spun out of control." This statement balances a supportive stance on immigration with a critique of the EU's management, positioning Johnson as a reasonable yet

assertive leader. The bright red background of the text box, a recurring design element in these ads, draws immediate attention and underscores the urgency of the message. Moreover, the call-to-action button, “Join Me, Vote Leave,” is prominently displayed, inviting viewers to align themselves with Johnson’s position.

The second ad shows Johnson in a dynamic pose, holding a “Vote Leave” flag. This image conveys a sense of action and leadership, portraying Johnson as actively engaged in the campaign. The text asserts, “In the EU, our immigration is no longer controlled by us. The only way to take back control is to vote leave on 23 June!” The use of the phrase “take back control” is a powerful rhetorical device that taps into feelings of lost sovereignty and autonomy, common themes in the Brexit discourse. The red background and prominent call-to-action button remain consistent, ensuring the message’s urgency and encouraging immediate action.

The third ad features Johnson speaking to a crowd, amplifying his role as a public figure and leader of the Brexit movement. The image is bustling with activity, suggesting widespread support and engagement. The text states, “Immigration must be controlled by those who the public elect and not the EU! On the 23 June they will get their chance to take back control.” This statement reinforces the narrative of democratic control and sovereignty, emphasizing the importance of the upcoming vote. The phrase “take back control” is repeated, creating a consistent and emphatic message across the ads.

In all three ads, the visual strategy centers on presenting Johnson as a credible, active, and approachable leader. The high modality of the images, capturing him in realistic and expressive moments, enhances his relatability and authority. The textual elements consistently stress themes of control, sovereignty, and urgency, using the recurring motif of the bright red background to draw attention and convey importance. The call-to-action, “Join Me, Vote Leave,” personalizes the message, framing the campaign as a collective effort led by Johnson.

The multimodal approach in these ads effectively combines visual and textual elements to construct a persuasive narrative. By portraying Johnson in dynamic and relatable poses and coupling these images with assertive and urgent text, the ads aim to mobilize viewers to support the Vote Leave campaign. This strategic use of multimodal elements reinforces the ideological stance of the campaign, appealing to viewers’ emotions and sense of national identity.

3.3. Discussion

The analysis of the Vote Leave campaign's Facebook advertisements through the lens of MCDA reveals the intricate ways in which visual and textual elements are combined to convey powerful ideological messages. This section interprets these findings and connects them to the theoretical framework established in the paper, highlighting the broader implications of the campaign's strategies.

The Vote Leave campaign effectively utilized a combination of textual and visual strategies to evoke strong emotional responses and reinforce its ideological stance. The ads capitalized on fear, nationalism, and protectionism, presenting the European Union as a threat to British sovereignty, cultural identity, and economic stability.

The use of high modality in visuals, such as realistic depictions of British landscapes and figures like Boris Johnson, enhanced the authenticity and relatability of the campaign's messages. By contrast, low modality images, such as abstract representations of immigration threats, amplified the perceived danger in a generalized and emotionally impactful manner. Furthermore, the portrayal of figures like healthcare professionals looking downward and Boris Johnson in dynamic, assertive poses effectively communicated concern and leadership, respectively. These visual choices established credibility and emotional connections with the audience.

The frequent use of British cultural symbols, such as the Union Jack, red telephone boxes, and traditional British landscapes, invoked a sense of nationalism and nostalgia. On the other hand, metaphors like the cracked EU flag and the overflowing passport visually symbolized fragmentation and uncontrolled immigration, reinforcing the campaign's narrative.

Lexical strategies, such as overlexicalization and recontextualization, played a pivotal role in the textual components of the ads. Overlexicalization involved the frequent repetition of certain buzzwords and phrases, such as "take back control" or "immigration," which were tailored to emphasize the potential problems being highlighted, thereby heightening the perceived urgency and severity of the issues. Similarly, recontextualization involved taking elements from their original context and placing them into a new one, thereby altering their meaning and creating a sense of imminent threat and urgency. This selective framing of information effectively supported the campaign's ideological objectives.

Metaphors and structural oppositions were also prominent in the campaign's strategies. Metaphors allowed for the projection of familiar experiences onto more complex and abstract ideas, making the campaign's messages more relatable and emotionally charged. Structural oppositions, such as "us" versus "them" and "control" versus "chaos," created clear ideological divides, framing the EU and its policies as inherently problematic while positioning Brexit as the solution. These strategies were effectively employed in both text and images to reinforce the campaign's ideological stance.

The findings align with the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis and MCDA, demonstrating how discourse, both visual and textual, serves as a tool for exercising power and shaping social practices. The Vote Leave ads not only conveyed explicit political messages but also embedded deeper ideological meanings, reinforcing nationalist and xenophobic sentiments. Furthermore, the campaign's strategic use of multimodal elements effectively normalized its ideological messages through persistent representation in media. By continually exposing the public to these ideologically charged messages, the Vote Leave campaign aimed to shape public discourse and influence voter behavior. This consistent exposure might have helped embed the campaign's viewpoints within the public consciousness, making them appear as common-sense solutions. Moreover, the analysis underscores the role of multimodal discourse in constructing social realities. The ads' portrayal of immigration as a threat and the EU as a bureaucratic oppressor contributed to a discourse that legitimized Brexit as a necessary measure to protect national sovereignty and identity. This discursive construction aligns with the notion that language and visual communication are integral to maintaining or challenging power relations within society.

The Vote Leave campaign's success in influencing public opinion through multimodal strategies highlights the potential impact of digital political advertising in contemporary electoral processes. The ability to target specific demographics with tailored messages, coupled with the emotional power of visual and textual elements, underscores the importance of critically examining political advertisements.

In summary, the Vote Leave campaign's use of multimodal strategies possibly influenced public perception and might have played an important role in the Brexit outcome. The analysis highlights the power of multimodal discourse in political communication, revealing the complex interplay of visual and textual elements in conveying ideological messages and influencing voter behavior.

4. Conclusion

This paper has provided a comprehensive analysis of the Vote Leave campaign's use of Facebook advertisements during the Brexit referendum through the lens of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). Starting with an introduction that outlined the significance of social media in modern political campaigns, the study suggested that targeted digital advertising could have had an important role in influencing the Brexit vote.

The theoretical framework grounded the analysis in critical discourse analysis and multimodality, explaining how language, visuals, and symbols interact to convey ideological meanings. By examining key concepts such as discourse, ideology, and multimodal strategies, the paper laid the foundation for a detailed exploration of the campaign's advertisements. The methodology section described the systematic approach taken to collect and analyze the data, utilizing the principles of MCDA to dissect the combination of textual and visual elements within the Vote Leave ads.

The analysis section provided in-depth examinations of specific advertisements, revealing how the Vote Leave campaign employed a variety of multimodal strategies to evoke emotional responses, manipulate public perceptions, and reinforce nationalist and protectionist sentiments. Through the use of visual metaphors, textual repetition, and strategic framing, the campaign tried to communicate its messages to the targeted audience.

Finally, the discussion connected these findings to the broader theoretical context, illustrating how the campaign's use of multimodal discourse tried to shape public opinion and how it could have influenced the Brexit referendum outcome.

In summary, the paper highlights the potential of multimodal political advertising in modern elections. By examining the Vote Leave campaign's strategies, it emphasizes the importance of understanding how visual and textual elements work together in political messaging. As digital platforms continue to develop, the insights from this kind of analysis help to better navigate the evolving field of political communication. Finally, the findings of this paper are based on one particular perspective. This perspective is significantly shaped by my own beliefs and views. Consequently, it reflects a specific ideological stance. Different analytical perspectives could potentially yield alternative interpretations, underscoring the subjective nature of discourse analysis.

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