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OPPOSITIONAL MUSIC MASH UPS
Populist Manifestations in Online Criticism to UK Conservative Government Actions

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Abstract – Globally, populism is on the rise, evident in Putin's Russia, Oban's Hungary and Trump's America. The UK's Conservative governments since Margaret Thatcher have also been accused of being populist, despite populism, in all its forms, being divisive and polarising. One sphere in which we find resistance to populist governments is digital popular culture. Though memes, mash ups, parodies, animations and other forms of popular culture on social media are dismissed by some as "just a bit of fun", scholars have shown how these can also be political, infused and shaped by power relations and ideologies. Leaning on Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies, this paper analyses written and spoken lexica, images and musical sounds in a sample of musical mash ups produced by @PoliticsJOE. This analysis reveals how these rely on forms of populism as they represent and recontextualise UK Conservative governments and their actions from 2019 to 2024. It is through such a close reading that I consider the role(s) such digital popular culture can play in public discourse.

Keywords: Brexit; multimodal critical discourse studies; music; mash up; populism; digital popular culture.

1. Introduction

Globally, there has been a rise in populism, characterised by elites who react to globalisation, liberalism and modernity as threats to national culture and identity. This is evident in Putin's Russia, Meloni's Italy, Orbán's Hungary, Modi's India, and Trump's America (DeHanas 2023; Freedom House 2022; Mudde 2016; Robertson and Nestore 2022). Despite its current appeal, critics point out how populism is divisive and polarising. The UK's Conservative governments (Conservatives) have consistently leaned on various forms of populism since Margaret Thatcher (Fieschi 2019). From 2010 to 2024 the Conservatives were also embroiled in political instability including Brexit followed by Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron's resignation; Boris Johnson's election, Covid 19 lockdowns, rule breaking and Johnson's subsequent resignation; the swift rise and fall of Liz Truss; the selection of Rishi Sunak as PM and his 2024 national election loss. One sphere we hear criticism about populists is digital popular culture, ridiculing elites online

being "one of the most important forms of political participation and activism today" (Merrin 2019, p. 201). This paper investigates how online mash ups shared widely on social media, criticise recent UK Conservative governments. Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies (MCDS), I examine lexica, images and musical sounds to analyse not only what issues and concerns are raised in relation to government actions, but also how these are articulated. Through these close readings, I reveal how these critiques themselves lean on populism. I consider the implications of such leanings in terms of benefits and harm to society.

2. Populism

Populism can be linked to a wide range of political stand points from the extreme right to the radical left (Scoones *et al*. 2021, p. 2). It is a divisive discourse that represents "popular interests and values" (Williams 1988, p. 238) with a universal "appeal to the people and anti-elitism" (Laclau 2005, p. 7). Populism represents "popular-democratic elements […] as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc" (Laclau 1977, p. 143), firmly "separating the 'people' from power" (Laclau 2005, p. 224). The "elite" and "the people" are not prefixed natural categories, but signifiers that acquire meaning through a diversity of discourses and contexts (De Cleen and Carpentier 2010; Laclau 2005, p. 74). So, who are defined as "the people" and the "elite" depends on who constructs these groups and for what purposes. This is demonstrated in studies on Belgian political groups (De Cleen and Carpentier 2010), Turkish politicians, protesters and musicians (Way 2018, 2023), the political left and right during Obama's 2008 election campaign (Jordan 2013), Donald Trump and musicians who oppose him (Merrin 2019; Way 2023), Greek politicians (Serafis *et al*. 2022), and Brexit Britain under the Conservatives (Way 2024). We find populism, in its various forms and accents, "has a chameleon-like quality which can adapt flexibly to a variety of substantive ideological values and principles" (Norris and Inglehart 2019, p. 3).

The UK's recent Conservative governments under Johnson, Truss then Sunak were populist. This populist turn can be traced back to Margaret Thatcher's brand of Conservatism and how she represented nationalism, a disdain for established elites, appeals to common sense, and hatred of the left (Fieschi 2019, p. 119). Conservative populism later developed into "a strong brand of populist Euroscepticism" in the late 1990s (Bale 2018, p. 266). Fuelled by years of tabloid news outlets "developing a terrain for populist argumentation", the divide between the "people" and the "elite" prepared the UK for the "success" of British populism and "its key manifestation …. Brexit" (Fieschi 2019, pp. 119-128). Since Brexit, UK populism has

continued from Johnson's "Get Brexit Done" to Sunak's and Home Secretary Suella Braverman's aggressive anti-immigration policies. Braverman's 2023 speech that spoke of "a 'hurricane' of mass migration", Sunak's targeting the transgender community, the Conservative's discourse on the nation and the exclusion of "immigrants, people of another race" are "textbook populism" (Rooduijn 2023, as cited in Henley 2023).

3. Role of Social Media and Mash Ups

A musical "mash up" refers to "sample-based music where 'new' songs are created entirely from 'old' recordings" (Maloy 2010, p. 2). In audio-visual online mash ups (hereafter mash ups), producers sample video, speech and music to produce a "new" hybrid of meme, music and video. These are viewed by large numbers of people who are "unlikely to watch a conventional political broadcast" (D'Ursa 2018). A prime example saw UK opposition leader (at the time) Jeremy Corbyn's face mashed onto rapper Stormzy to produce digital popular culture that "helped Labour's standing in the 2017 general election (especially among the youth)" (ibid.). Studies demonstrate the limits and potential of mash ups, these not necessarily "chang[ing] the world, [though they] engage us for a brief moment in affective populist political framings of current events…" (Way 2021b, p. 503).

Though well-liked, not all academics are optimistic about digital popular culture's political potential. It is accused of being a space where "gossiping is far more common and interesting to people than voting…. [and] embarrassing videos and body fluid jokes fare much better than serious critiques of power" (Boyd 2008, pp. 243-4). However, some of this is highly ideological, internet memes, for example, being a "public commentary" or a way "a society expresses and thinks of itself" (Denisova 2019, p. 2; Milner 2018, p. 2357). More recent studies demonstrate how politics are expressed in various forms of digital popular culture (Bouvier and Way [ed.] 2021; Way 2021a), even offerings that on the surface are 'non-political' are 'infused with ideas and values, with discourses about how we should run our societies, what we should prioritise, how we should communicate, and judgements about identities and actions' (Bouvier and Way 2021, p. 345). Much of digital popular culture does not communicate to us in logical well-structured arguments, but through affect, comedy and fun (Denisova 2019; Merrin 2019; Way 2021a; Wiggins 2019). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated how much of this leans on various forms populist discourses (see Dunkel and Schiller [ed.] 2022; Way 2021b). This present study reveals how mash ups articulate such discourses in order to consider the implications such media play in politics and society more generally.

4. Data and Approach

I have chosen to analyse mash ups produced by @PoliticsJOE, one of JOE's eight "vertical" platforms. JOE, founded in 2010 and part of Maximum Media digital publishing company, is a "Left-Center Biased" ("Joe.co.uk…" 2024) social media publisher. Its content is aimed at "serving the interests, passions and curiosities of the modern man" between the ages of 18 and 35, attracting four million monthly unique users ("About us" 2023). @PoliticsJOE boasts 471,000 subscribers with over 1760 videos on offer and 212,476,131 views at the time of writing. It distributes its content on its website, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Linked In. In 2020, the platform won the "Content Creator of the Year" award for one of its political mash ups ("JOE Media: Swedemason" 2020).

This paper considers a sample of mash ups dating from Johnson's 2019 UK general election win to the Conservatives losing elections in 2024. There are 41 mash ups from this time period[1], these referring to (1) scandals, (2) declining popularity, and/ or (3) unpopular political decisions. I examined all of these to inform my close analysis of two: 2019's "Jacob Rees-Mogg's message for the Common People" (Mogg's message)[2] and "Budget 2023: Don't Worry Be Happy - The Tories ft. Bobby McFerrin" (Be Happy)[3].

"Mogg's Message", an anti-Brexit mash up, has received 2,047,651 views on YouTube since its release. It is made up of visuals of politician Jacob Rees-Mogg (Mogg) *in situ* and edited onto scenes from Pulp's "Common people" music video, a simplified instrumental version of Pulp's original song, and "lyrics" consisting of manipulated Mogg speech. Mogg is a high-profile Conservative MP (since 2010) who has served as Leader of the House of Commons and Lord President of the Council since 2019. He is a symbol of privilege, being born into the elite, educated at Eton College and the University of Oxford and one of the highest-earning politicians in the country (Bennet 2018; Wilford 2017). He is idolised by right-wing, pro-Brexit voters, whilst reviled by the left for his support for policies that challenge workers' rights and benefits for those in need (Wilford 2017). Considering Mogg's social and policy positions, choosing to mash up Mogg with "Common people" is ironic, seeing as the original song is a critical examination of class in the UK (Keppler, 2018).

"Be Happy", released on 15 March 2023, is a critique of the Conservatives handling of the cost-of-living crisis, including its 2023 Spring budget. It has received 205,848 views on YouTube. Visuals see former and

[1] The links to these are: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSFI8zc9DUU&list=PLO2mmhF3LwFXQcUlJZ6vnwtmgd61RyDK8.
[2] The link is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3TT1VE8Jq0.
[3] The link is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvtSomaXKE8.

current (at the time of release) Conservative politicians speaking in public engagements. "Lyrics" are manipulated speech excerpts that form two lines that refer to political issues and/ or scandals followed by the refrain "Don't worry, be happy". The music is a simplified version of Bobby McFerrin's 1988 song "Don't worry, be happy". McFerrin's original was a positive "formula for facing life's trials" (Stitt 2012), while the mash up responds to a crisis arguably exacerbated by Conservative actions.

I approach texts using musicology-inspired Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies (McKerrell and Way 2017; Way 2019a, 2019b, 2021a). The analysis of lexica, images and musical sounds reveal how these mash ups recontextualise the social practices of Conservatives and "us" the people. Representations of social practices can be considered recontextualisations, that is, a construction that involves transformations (van Leeuwen 1993a, 1993b). Transformations are ideological with choices made that "selectively appropriate, relocate, refocus and relate other discourses to constitute its own order" thereby detaching or "abstracting" a discourse from its original "social base, position and power relations" (Bernstein 1996, pp. 47, 53). As such, recontextualisations result in discourses different from those articulated in original texts. In our case, the social practices of Conservatives and the British "people" are transformed and recontextualised into musical mash ups.

The analysis uses van Leeuwen and Wodak's (1999) four types of transformations that recontextualise social practices: Deletions, rearrangements, substitutions, and additions. In this analysis, I consider how the social practices of Conservatives and "the people" have been transformed in the mash ups. Specifically, I consider what has been included and excluded; how facts, events and issues are rearranged; what semiotic resources are substituted for social actors, their actions and events; and what reactions, purposes, and legitimations are added to the representation of social practices. Scholars demonstrate how all four of these transformations are not neutral, but suit text producers' interests (Way 2021a), transformations being "relate(d) to the interests, goals and values of the context into which the practice is recontextualised" (Bernstein 1996, p. 97). The analysis also includes an examination of how voice and musical aspects of the original songs are recontextualised into these mash ups, leaning on studies on the semiotics of sound (Cooke 1959; Machin 2010; Tagg 1984, 1990; van Leeuwen 1999; Walser 1995; Way 2017, 2023; Zbikowski 2015). A close textual analysis of both these mash ups reveals how they lean on their own brands of populism whilst criticising populist politicians.

5. Analysis

In all 41 mash ups across the sample, we find divisive discourses that clearly demarcate Conservatives as a despotic elite who are distinct from "us" the people. This is manifested in how both groups, their actions and their ideas are represented and recontextualised.

5.1. Two Distinct Groupings

In "Mogg's message", Mogg personifies the "elite". As he narrates the mash up, his lyrics construct a callous Brexit-supporting elite distinct from "the people". The pronouns "I", "we" and "us" name the former while "their", "them" and "the people" the latter. Alongside these namings, a Greek woman named as "she", "you" and "her" acts as a metonym for the people. Together, these names and pronouns construct a group of "us" the people struggling against Brexiteer-supporting elites.

In two scenes, visuals also play a role in constructing two distinct groups. Figure one is taken from a speaking engagement that sees Mogg wearing formal attire, including a black suit and bow tie. Clothes connote his "elite" status. He is activated "speaking to an audience" again connoting power. To the viewer's left, a spectator is salient through lighting, focus and central proximity. Unlike Mogg, he wears a dark T-shirt whilst frowning at Mogg.

This is an emotive reaction to Mogg, representing private feelings and suggesting weakness (van Leeuwen 1995, p. 86). Recontextualised as such, the boy is a metonym for the people, undermining Mogg, showing difference and disapproval.

Figure 1
Difference and disapproval.

Difference between the elite and the people is also emphasised in "Be Happy". This is evident in politicians' lyrics. For example, Sunak sings "Deep in debt and can't pay your rent, just eat some porridge and buy a tent…". Two distinct groups are constructed through the possessive determiner "your" that suggests there is a group that excludes Sunak. This "other" group is not well defined, though difference is suggested. The first phrase recontextualises how people were suffering with the cost-of-living crisis. During this time, household debt hit over two trillion Sterling,[4] whilst foodbank usage and rental defaults affected "one in 20 tenants" (Jones 2023). Here, @PoliticsJOE presupposes that debt and the inability to pay rent are common amongst "the people" and the solution is to eat and live cheaply. Though homelessness affects more than 300,000 people on any given night ("What causes homelessness", 2023), this is not how the vast majority of the public were experiencing the crisis. Joe recontextualises all levels of financial stresses the public was enduring to the most severe circumstances (homelessness and food poverty). This oversimplifies a complex economic, social and political crisis experienced differently across the UK. However, this does construct a group of elites who are very different than "the people".

Difference is further connoted through sound and visual choices of Sunak. The bass in Sunak's vocals has been almost eliminated making him sound "tinny" and small (Tagg 2012), while heavy auto-tune and echo make him sound unnatural, almost robot-like, not like a caring person (Way 2023). Between the phrase "Don't worry" and "Be happy", there is a long gap in vocals, drawing our attention to a lyric, image or idea (Way 2023). Here, the pause emphasises visuals that connote difference. Sunak looks down on us with a smug grin, articulating a discourse of privilege (Figure 2). Though the vertical angle of interaction allows us to easily identify Sunak, here (and throughout the mash except for two shots) he is in a chest shots, similar to shot types seen on television news. This is about formality. He wears a dark jacket, white shirt and tie further suggesting formality, not someone who is personable and sympathetic. The vertical angle of interaction of the camera points up at Sunak connoting power. In this case, misused economic elite power. Backgrounds of Lloyds bank and the CBI remind viewers of his closeness to big business and his past working for banks and hedge fund management firms. In the context of lyrics, images and sounds that suggest callousness such as suggesting we live in tents, the mash up connotes an elite, different from "us" people who cannot pay our rent.

[4] This is taken from a study by pwc. Link is https://www.pwc.co.uk/press-room/pressreleases/house hold-debt-tops-p2-trillion-for-the-first-time-as-new-data-s.html.

Figure 2
Smug elite.

5.2. Despotic elite

In both, we find not only difference but negativity surrounding the elite, a despotic elite being key to populism (Laclau 2005). In "Mogg's message", the elite are represented as powerful, manipulative and liars. Power and manipulation are seen in these lines that recontextualise the Brexit referendum: "We let the people have their say, then we convinced them not to stay". To "let" a referendum happen presupposes power. Likewise, to "convince" presupposes being powerfully manipulative. This recontextualisation simplifies positions on the Brexit campaign within the Conservatives, some of whom campaigned to stay in the EU. This also deletes any agency of the people, including segments of the population who supported Brexit. Also deleted are factors that led to a slim majority voting to "leave" the EU, including fear of foreigners, national pride and a distrust of the EU. Elsewhere, Conservatives are represented as liars in the lines "[We] Sold them falsehoods on a bus, deflect all the blame from us". This recontextualises the slogan "We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS instead" written on the side of a Leave campaign bus. This campaign stunt is recontextualised with negative lexica of selling "falsehoods" and "deflect[ing] blame". Lines like these are severe simplifications of social practices that emphasise politicians' despotic use of power at the expense of a disempowered and victimised people.

Visuals include Mogg's head mashed onto Pulp's lead singer's (Jarvis Cocker's) body. These connote Mogg is absurd (Figure 3). Here, Mogg is salient through focus, lighting and central image position. In the original Pulp video, Cocker claims the dance being performed here represents the "stupid things you do" ("The making of…", 2014). In the mash up, this dance is recontextualised to ridicule Mogg, his feet kicking up like a Las Vegas chorus dancer. He wears Cocker's reddish-brown coloured jacket, black shirt

open at the collar and a tan-coloured tie. The dance and clothing ridicule Mogg's conservative image and dress style of three-piece suits that has earned him the nickname "the Honourable Member for the 18th Century" (Wilford 2017).

Figure 3
Absurd.

A number of melodic choices connote negativity surrounding Mogg and the elite. Like the original Pulp song, the mash up's melody is a three-chord progression in the key of C playing the first, fourth and fifth notes (C, G7 and F). Note choices carry connotations, these being heavily dependent on context (Cooke 1959; Machin 2010). The first and fifth (C and G7) anchor the melody, connoting stability, the everyday, but also the boring (Cooke 1959). The fourth (F) is associated with building or moving forward. In the context of negative lyrics and imagery, these notes suggest Mogg is not only boring, but also associated with negativity.

The song's instrumental and vocal melodies are fairly static. Figure four is a visual representation of a typical vocal line in the chorus. Most of the line is sung on one note (F) and then moves up one note twice to the G. A melody like this connotes "very little outward giving of emotion or positive energy" (Machin 2010). This is unlike the original Pulp song. In the original, Cocker sings the same few notes like "Mogg's Message" for the first minute and 40 seconds, connoting constrained emotional "coolness". However, in the second half of the original, Cocker raises his voice a whole octave, as the tempo increases connoting excitement, agitation and possibly anger. In the mash up, much of this is deleted as Mogg sings the entire song without a change in pitch, suggesting a lack of emotion, a part of his callousness.

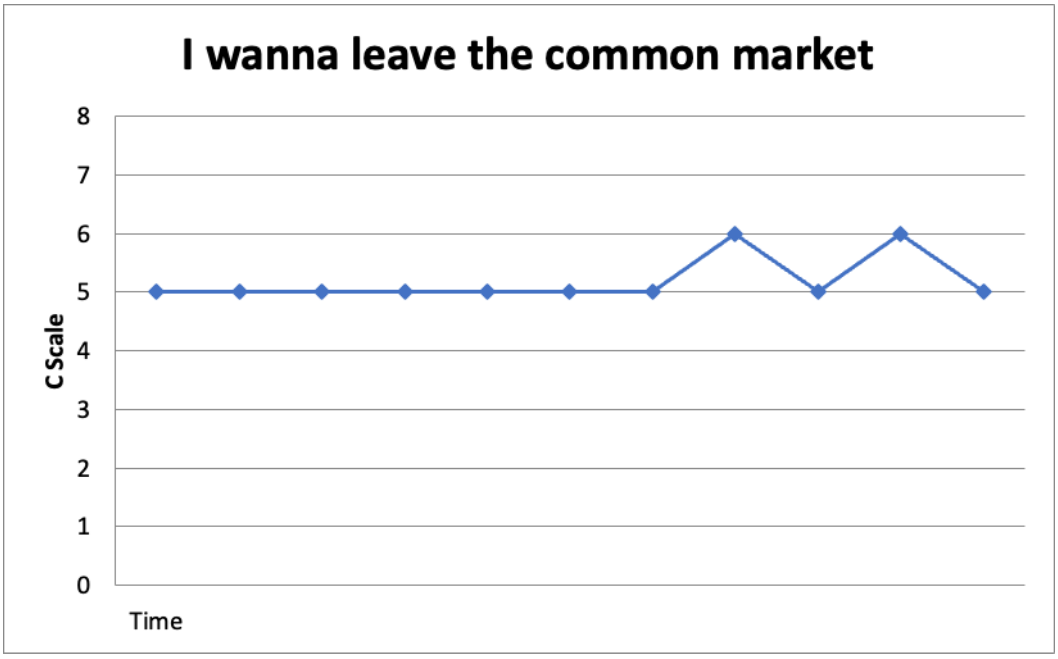

Figure 4
Static melody.

The manipulation of time also carries meanings: A slower tempo suggesting less excitement than a faster one, while a consistent tempo suggests an "unnatural" mechanical obedience to "the system" (Tagg 1984). In the original Pulp song, tempo fluctuates between 90 and 160 beats per minute, producer Chris Thomas claiming this was "absolutely intrinsic to the [song's] excitement". In "Mogg's message", timing remains perfectly consistent at a slower 72 beats per minute. This consistent tempo choice emphasises the idea that Mogg is uncaring and inauthentic by being part of "the system" while the slower tempo omits excitement, suggesting Mogg is a bit of a bore. Both these connotations are represented in the visual and lexical choices throughout the mash up.

In "Be Happy", similar strategies can be found across all three modes, though this mash up represents the elite as "out of touch", "insincere", "squander our money as we suffer" and "mad". An "insincere" discourse is articulated in representations of three well-known Conservatives: Jeremy Hunt, Nadhim Zahawi and Boris Johnson. In all three, we see each politician smile or laugh and then abruptly "turn off the taps" and frown. Representations of Hunt as insincere is represented multimodally whilst singing "Don't want to wait In A & E, Jump the queue Go Privately….". These lines that recontextualise the long waits people have to endure in public-run NHS hospitals presuppose that Hunt both favours private health care and this is something "the people" can afford. The former presupposition leans on popular discourses that see the Conservatives dismantling public health care whilst advancing the interests of private health care (Chakelian

2023). The latter presupposition articulates a discourse of being different and privileged, seeing as most UK citizens rely on the NHS for health care. Furthermore, the action "jump the queue" is a socially frowned upon action, presupposing Hunt is morally lacking, not to be trusted.

Imagery further emphasises Hunt is insincere and untrustworthy. As is the case with all the images of Conservatives, Hunt mostly looks off screen in "offer" images, omitting symbolic engagement with viewers (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). He does not look at us "in the eye", something we expect when speaking to each other in Western cultures. In fact, Hunt quickly moves his eyes across the screen in seven of the 14 shots, all but one without looking at the camera/ viewers. In the last shot (Figure 5), Hunt looks at the viewer for a split second before his eyes dart to the left and down, similar to someone who avoids eye contact after telling a lie or being ashamed.

Figure 5
Insincere Hunt.

Throughout the mash up, musical choices connote negativity surrounding the Conservatives. McFerrin's original song starts with 29 seconds of high-pitched whistling. This is foregrounded in the hierarchy of sound, emphasising hope and positivity (Way 2021a). After 15 seconds and accompanied by visuals of three antagonists dancing together, the whistling sound doubles, both "whistlers" whistling the same notes at the same time. In the context of happy protagonists dancing together, sounds suggest positivity and unity (van Leeuwen 1999, p. 79). There are lower "rhythm" vocals in the original, though these are backgrounded. The overall atmosphere created through visuals and sounds is happiness and frivolity. In the mash up, this "happy" introduction is completely excluded.

Like the original, the mash up's lyrical structure consists of two rhyming lines followed by the refrain "Don't worry, Be happy". Between each of these, the original includes approximately 30 seconds of high-pitched singing of "Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh", extending to a minute at the end of the song. As such, almost half of the original song includes these uplifting sounds. Again, these "positive" sounds are excluded between lyrics and only heard in the last five seconds of the mash up, contributing to more negative

recontextualisation. Even these last "happy sounds" in the mash up are disrupted by a sound effect of a record being turned off, connoting this happiness is not "real", but a recording.

5.3. People as Victims

Much of populism includes representing the people separate from power and victims of elite actions. Again, we see this in both mash ups. In "Mogg's message", lexica rearranges social actions in ways that emphasise victimisation. Consider the first verse:

> "She came from Greece/ She had a thirst for knowledge
> I explained 'I went to Eton college',
> That's when she…/ laughed at me.
> I told her that my dad was loaded
> And how I'll profit if the pound imploded
> And then she cried/ Because her visa had expired."

In the first two lines, "a woman from Greece" is used as a metonym for a segment of "the people", people from countries other than the UK. She is represented positively wanting to learn, empowered in a mental process. This is very different than some Brexit (and racist) arguments that claim "foreigners" steal UK jobs and burden the welfare state. These lines are arranged directly before Mogg suggests his elite status in: "I explained 'I went to Eton College'". Here, Mogg is active connoting a degree of power while his elite status is alluded to in being educated at Eton, an educational institution associated with the elite. We also learn of his economic status in: "I told her that my dad was loaded". Though privileged, Mogg is delegitimised here due to his wealth coming from his father. This representation omits Mogg's success as a wealthy businessman. Arranged directly after a positive representation of a "foreigner", this verse emphasises difference and positivity around the people. But this verse also disempowers the Greek woman, creating sympathy for her and the people as victims. Both she "laughed" and "cried" are reactions to Mogg, a disempowered representation.

Furthermore, crying is a semiotic process associated with weakness and more with women than men (Caldas-Coulthard 1994, p. 306). Here, we learn of her emotional states, inviting us to sympathise with her and align ourselves with her point of view. The lines: "Then she cried … because her visa had expired" are arranged in a recontextualisation that directly links her reaction to her immigration status, it being the cause of her grief. Though Mogg is not represented as directly acting upon her visa decision, the action of "her visa had expired" followed by Mogg declaring "[I] Want to keep out…Foreign people like you" suggests a link between Mogg and the

woman's visa problems. Taking (back) control of immigration was one of the discourses of the Leave campaign and one of many reasons why people voted to leave the EU, some of this fuelled by racism (Shaw 2019). Here, the motive behind Mogg wanting Brexit is represented as racist, a natural sounding pause after this statement emphasising the line. As such, this first verse and chorus represent the people sympathetically as victims, while Mogg is represented as a racist, a recontextualisation that articulates a populist discourse of an unsympathetic elite victimising the people.

In visuals, we also find victimisation of the people. Figure six is a mash up of Mogg and a dance floor scene from the original Pulp video, this scene in the original used to highlight one aspect of "bleak" working-class life (Keppler 2018). In the mash up, this is recontextualised to construct a manipulative elite. Mogg is salient being centre stage and in the foreground connoting importance (Machin 2007; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). Dancers appear in the background connoting less importance. They are powerless, reacting to Mogg by copying his dance moves (van Leeuwen 1995, p. 86). Furthermore, they dance with a lack of energy and conviction, robotically, and mindlessly. Here, the people are represented as powerless by metaphorically being manipulated and reacting to the elite's (Mogg's) actions.

Figure 6
Powerless people.

Deletions of sounds from Pulp's original song again suggest victimisation of the people. Instrumentation in the mash up is simple, unlike the original that has a large list of instruments that "filled a 48-track tape and created a multi-layered sound" ("Classic Tracks: Pulp", 2013). Though many of the tonal characteristics remain, many flourishes, instrumentation, and nuances are

deleted. This simplicity allows listeners to focus on Mogg's voice. Furthermore, simplicity connotes a high level of certainty or modality (van Leeuwen 1999). In this case, sounds enhance the certainty of lyrics and images about elites being callous, out of touch, and against the people's interests.

In "Be Happy" victimisation can be seen in representations of most of the politicians. A discourse examined here and noted throughout the video is "They are mad and their policies hurt us". This is seen in representations of Johnson, Braverman and Truss. It is Truss's representations that use all three modes to articulate this discourse. Negative economic repercussions of Truss's 2022 budget are recontextualised in her first line of "Brought the economy to its knees". This knee metaphor suggests the budget was a staggering blow to the people's economy and clearly puts the blame of the economic crisis on Truss. Though analysts, commentators and even Conservatives believed her budget was not good for the economy, the world was already in a financial crisis. Recontextualised as such, her ideas seem "mad". Line two's "I got a payoff as your pay's squeezed" point to difference and victimisation. "I" personalises an established policy that allows former prime ministers to claim "The Public Duty Cost Allowance". This is a payment of up to £115,000 a year to maintain former PMs' offices. There was an outcry about Truss taking advantage of this due to her very short tenure of 45 days and her attempts at cutting taxes (Forrest 2023). This is recontextualised as "I got a payoff", a binary opposite to "your pay squeezed". Though wages were struggling to keep up with high inflation, this recontextualisation over-simplifies the callousness and difference of a corrupt, harmful elite as they "hurt" the people.

Voice manipulation also plays a role in articulating a "mad" hurtful discourse. Truss's second and third lines ("I got a payoff as your pay's squeezed, Don't worry") are sung a full octave above her singing on the first and fourth lines. Tagg (1990, p. 112) observes how high notes carry with them potentially positive or negative connotations of effort, assertiveness and urgency, depending on context. In the original, McFerrin adds excitement by singing high notes on three occasions and using high pitched trumpet sounds between "Don't worry" and "Be Happy". These choices add energy and fun to the tune, accentuated by comical visuals. However, women singing high notes can be "belittling" and if also loud, "can invoke the 'shrill and strident fishwife' stereotype" (van Leeuwen 1999, p. 134). Truss's voice during these lines are an octave higher than the other lines, her voice sounding tense and sharp due to tension in her throat muscles. As such, these lines connote aggression and excitement, "not casual, laid back and informal" as suggested with a wide open relaxed throat sound (Fonagy and Magdic 1972, p. 286). With lyrics telling us about our financial woes, Truss's high notes accentuate her madness as she hurts "us".

Truss's voice manipulation and imagery also articulate danger. Women who sing in a low pitch can suggest a "dangerous woman" stereotype (van Leeuwen 1999, p. 134). We hear this in Truss's first line, accompanied by dark imagery (Figure 7), connoting evil and negativity (Machin 2007). Though salient, Truss is out of focus. She looks tired, her eyes cast down almost shamefully in a disempowering offer image (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2010). Here, lyrics tells us she has ruined the economy. She wears dark clothes and is not speaking in public, but "hidden away" in a radio studio. In line four's "Be Happy" again she sings an octave lower. As such, these choices emphasise the gravity of the situation we face with squeezed wages.

Figure 7
Victimising Liz.

6. Conclusion

The UK under the stewardship of the Conservatives endured scandals and crises, these criticised by many on social media. @PoliticsJoe is one space where critiques of the Conservatives have successfully reached large audiences on a regular basis. Our analysis reveals how @PoliticsJoe's music mash ups articulate highly political discourses about actors, issues and events. These lean heavily on populism, discursively separating "the people" from power and the "elite" (Laclau 2005). In these mash ups, the people are represented as victims of, and pitted against, an elite who act in their own interest and against the interests of the people. In "Mogg's message", discourses about Brexit are recontextualised in ways that see very complex issues oversimplified, relying on stereotypes of elites, groups of voters and a unified people. Brexit-supporting elites are callous and work against the interests of a victimised people. Analysis of "Be Happy" also reveals how all

three modes construct recontextualisations that represent the Conservatives as "out of touch", "uncaring", "insincere", "untrustworthy", "corrupt" and even "mad". Alternatively, "the people" suffer and are harmed by policies and actions by "them". All the while, in both mash ups (and throughout the wider sample) very little is said about actual budgets or specific policies. As such, this study confirms previous studies that demonstrate how "the people" and "the elite" are fluid signifiers that acquire meaning through particular discourses and contexts, echoing the claim that populism "has a chameleon-like quality" (De Cleen and Carpentier 2010; Laclau 2005; Scoones *et al*. 2021). This study adds to this area of research, demonstrating how populism is employed by those who produce digital popular culture that criticises powerful and populist "elites".

On a societal level, we find digital popular culture, such as these mash ups, are an integral part of our lives, informing, communicating and entertaining us (KhosraviNik 2017; Way 2021b). Though there are many sceptics in terms of its political potential (Boyd 2008), through satire, parody, affect and fun, digital popular culture criticises those in power (Denisova 2019; Merrin 2019; Papacharissi 2015; Vásquez 2019; Way 2021b; Wiggins 2019). In this study, I demonstrate how mash ups highlight scandals, controversies and the misuse of power. Though much of this makes headlines in traditional news outlets, mash ups open these ideas up to a wide, and possibly different, news-disengaged, audience. This role offers hope, despite the polarisation and divisiveness associated with populism. Online mash ups, and digital popular culture more generally, can contribute to public discourses, allowing audiences to laugh at, but also think critically about those in power. And this is where their strengths lie.

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