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## How Did Twitter Influence the Debate on Brexit?

### **Introduction**

On the 23rd of June 2016, a vast and historic decision was made in the United Kingdom to go forward to possibly leave the European Union by a referendum. On the contrary to what some politicians and economists expected, this historical four-year event called “Brexit” happened and shocked citizens all over the world. The thing, which cannot be overlooked regarding this event, is that social media, including Twitter, played an essential role during the debate of Brexit. The reason why the author got interested in this issue is because of his social marketing major, which helps to understand how media is used to create or challenge public opinion. The purpose of this essay is to clarify how the social media platform, Twitter, influenced the debate of Brexit, how people utilized Twitter to influence and win the Leave referendum, the primary difference between the Leave and the Remain in the Twitter debate, and the fluctuation of the discussion on Twitter after the referendum.

This essay is divided into five sections. Firstly, this essay will explain what Brexit is and how it happened. This section will also provide the consequence of the referendum with specific data. Secondly, this essay will discuss from a broad perspective; how social media came to influence recent public opinion. This section will argue that the relationship between politicians, civilians, and how media has changed (Hanska-Ahy and Bauchowitz 27). Thirdly, this essay will discuss more specifically; the difference between the Leave and the Remain in the debate on

Brexit (Matsu and Benoit 27; McLoughlin et al. 15). It is reasonably clear that Leave was more active and well connected than the Remain camp based on the arguments and the research (Matsu and Benoit 2). As a concrete topic, the fourth section will discuss what strategies were used by the Twitter accounts of both groups – namely Leave and Remain (Llewellyn and Cram, 12). The research essay addresses this question from three perspectives; the number and the frequency of tweets, mentions, and hashtags. Finally, this essay will discuss the change of the debate on Brexit after the referendum. It can be argued that the situation of the debate has changed in response to political events which include the speech by former Prime Minister Theresa May.

## **Literature Review**

Background.

The word “Brexit” is the abbreviation for “British exit” and implies “the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the EU” (BBC 1). As a result of the referendum, which was held on the 23rd of June 2016, the Leave side won it by 52% (17.4 million votes) to 48% (16.1 million votes) (2). After that, the United Kingdom entered into prolonged negotiations with the EU to discuss a deal about the way the United Kingdom would leave, and the controversy over Brexit also made former Prime Minister (PM) Theresa May be replaced by the current PM Boris Johnson.

The Influence of Social Media on the Recent Public Opinion.

It can be clear that the connection between politicians, civilians, and media has changed with the development of social media. The rise of the usage of news information media also caused the decline of the popularity of paper media, such as newspapers (Hanska-Ahy and Bauchowitz 27). In 2015, it was reported by Ofcom that 43% of people who read or viewed news

online received it through social media (27). This trend also means that the importance of political activism through social media grew.

The expansion of social media also influenced the debate among politicians. It is argued that social media contributed to the deterioration of traditional party colours and hierarchies because of a new kind of parliamentary networks with social media (McLoughlin et al. 15). Who triggered this transformation was some Members of Parliament (MPs) called online experts, and they played a central role in facilitating online debate among politicians (15). This political debate can contribute to the outcomes of the referendum.

The Difference Between the Leave and the Remain in the Twitter Debate.

How was the difference configured and maintained between the Leave and the Remain on Twitter contributed to the result of the referendum? This essay argues that the Leave was more energetic and connected than the Remain was. Leave had a greater number of accounts and tweeted more frequently than the Remain did (Matsu and Benoit 2). Also, 83% of communications originated by the Leave supporters with other Leave supporters, while the rate of discussion of the Remain initiated with other Remainers was 46% (Hanska-Ahy and Bauchowitz 29). In other words, Leavers enthusiastically tried to find other Twitter users who also support the Leave comparing to Remainers.

There can be a difference from the perspective of the media colour in terms of the trend of coverage by various media. The media that supported the Leave tried to appeal more to Leave supporters, while Remain-supporting media was relatively impartial (Gorrel et al. 10). This situation shows that the Brexit question passed over the colour of some of the press, except prevailing media such as the Guardian or the Observer. In other words, Remain-supporting

media did not cling to follow Remain supporters, but showed their neutral coverage via various outlets.

#### The Strategies the Twitter Accounts of Both Groups Used.

This essay also examines the activation of three accounts; @LeaveEUofficial, @vote\_leave which supported the Leave, and @StrongerIn that supported the Remain. One of the most notable things is that @LeaveEUofficial was the most solid account (Llewellyn and Cram 12). The number of tweets and followers was the most in three accounts. While @LeaveEUofficial tweeted about 1000 times in total during the campaign, the total number of tweets by @StrongerIn was less than 200 (Llewellyn and Cram 3). This suggests that the Leave camp was more vigorous than the Remain faction.

It is also notable that there was also a strategic difference in how to utilize some unique features of Twitter, such as mention and hashtag. @LeaveEUofficial frequently mentioned traditional media, which have many followers in order to have an extensive reach of their opinion (Llewellyn and Cram 6). The interesting thing is that @vote\_leave and @StrongerIn mentioned each other many times to challenge the opponents' views attract to each other's supporters (12). In hashtags, their aims obviously appear. For example, @vote\_leave used hashtags to demonstrate their focus on business and sometimes to blame David Cameron, the ex-Prime Minister (Llewellyn and Cram 9). Although @StrongerIn used hashtags less frequently than the other two accounts did, as they hashtagged the name of the prime minister of India who supported the Remain (10). This technique helped to shape the debate and drive the narrative of smoother operation for Leave-supporting accounts.

## The Situation of the Debate on Twitter After the Referendum.

The situation of the debate on Twitter changed even after the referendum due to responses to political events after the speech by Prime Minister Theresa May (De Lyon et al. 5). After her speech in Florence on the 22nd of September 2017, De Lyon et al. (3) demonstrated in a Word Cloud based on activity that the discussion of Brexit on Twitter was moderately general, and the political topics that became significant later that were not focused yet at that time (3). However, after her speech in the House of Commons on the 11th of December 2017, a word cloud analysis, in De Lyon et al.'s study, showed the large highlighted words were related to the Labour Party such as "labour" and "Corbyn (Jeremy Corbyn)" that indicated the position of Labour Party was unclear (2-3). And after that, the topic of the debate on Twitter changed, and some issues that were initially not featured immersed in the debate (3). This suggests that citizens in the United Kingdom were sensitive to what the former Prime Minister said in her speech and showed what they thought on Twitter at a rapid pace.

The other important thing about the fluctuation of the debate on Twitter is that the discussion about politics and government was relatively popular while the debate on immigrants was not highlighted (De Lyon et al. 3-4). From September 2017 to April 2018, the most focused topic out of the four was politics and government, while the economy, immigration, and the Irish border was featured less every month.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this essay discussed what Brexit is and the result of the referendum, how social media came to influence the recent public opinion, the primary difference between the Leave and the Remain in the Twitter debate, the strategical difference between the actual Twitter accounts of both opinions, and the fluctuation of the debate on Twitter after the referendum. This

essay argues that the Leave was more active and highly connected among the networks on the Twitter debate than the Remain was, and that difference possibly contributed to the result of the referendum. Also, the discussion on Brexit was continuing after the referendum, and the public opinion was varying in response to the political events which happened afterward. This social media discussion could be applied to political development in the future, such as the influences and the outcome of the upcoming presidential election in the United States.

Word Count: 1519

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