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## The Mediatization of Knowledge About Brexit as Experienced by Polish Immigrants to the UK

*Abstract:* This article explores the media's influence on perceptions of Brexit among Polish immigrants in the UK and particularly how this influence shaped their knowledge and emotional responses. Media campaigns after the 2016 referendum but before the enactment of Brexit in 2019 significantly impacted public sentiment and often amplified insecurity during this politically tumultuous period. We examine how media consumption influenced the specific emotional reactions of Polish immigrants to Brexit. Our quantitative cross-sectional study involved 620 Polish immigrants to the UK. The results indicate that new media have not only become an important source of information about the world in general but have also started to serve as many people's primary reference for information about the world of politics. The media's focus on sensationalism has frequently overshadowed the dissemination of accurate, practical information about Brexit and its ramifications.

*Keywords:* mediatization of knowledge, emotions, Polish migrants, Brexit

### Introduction

The media play an important role in shaping the knowledge and opinions of their audiences. They especially influence how people perceive current social phenomena and political decisions. It is no exaggeration to say that the average citizen knows only as much about politics as they learn from the media. Today, there are virtually no limits to the flow of information (Castells 2009). This situation produces "information chaos," with the result that unrestricted access is not accompanied by clarity (Vaccari et al. 2023). The present-day "information jungle" reduces people's trust in the information they access and share. This does not help create a favourable climate for developing transparent, evidence-based information policies (Lee et al. 2023). Additionally, in the mediatization of knowledge, content is often intended to evoke emotions in the audience. For example, media may present dramatic stories, social problems, or research results in a way that induces empathy, outrage, anxiety, or other emotions (Sosnowska et al. 2023).

In light of the above, it is hardly surprising that the referendum on Brexit and its consequences have been a major topic for years not only in British but also in global social media, news outlets, and current affairs programs. Treatment of the subject in the media is an example of the “information jungle.” In the United Kingdom itself, even after COVID-19, the country’s divorce from the European Union is still a leading topic of interest.

### **The Role of the Media in Shaping Knowledge and Arousing Emotions**

The term “mediatization” is variously understood in the literature on the subject. Generally, it can be assumed to mean that the media are becoming increasingly important for many areas of human activity and social relations on the micro, meso, and macro levels. Research on mediatization processes aims to explore the mutual shaping relationship between the media and social life and to investigate how new media technologies influence and infiltrate social practices and culture (Döveling et al. 2018). As an increasing proportion of institutionalized activities occur through both interactive media and the mass media, the media are becoming an integral part of social institutions such as the family, politics, work, and organized religion (Hjarvard 2008). The mediatization of knowledge refers to the process by which the media shape and transform the way knowledge is produced, disseminated, and consumed. Today, media technologies and platforms play an increasing role in the transmission, comprehension, and interpretation of knowledge. Moreover, the media have become an arena for public debate and the legitimization of science. Hjarvard gives an example: People may have acquired their ideas about evolution from Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* films or the BBC documentary series *Walking with Dinosaurs* rather than from their formal education (Hjarvard 2008: 108). Krotz perceives mediatization as a continual process in which the media changes interpersonal relations and behaviors, and thereby changes society and culture (Krotz 2007).

The media often use emotions to attract the attention of their viewers, readers, or listeners. In recent years, there has been an observable increase in the emotionalization of media content, which means that content that was traditionally perceived as neutral (e.g., the news or documentaries) is more saturated with emotion now. Emotions are manipulated, for example, by presenting information in a certain way or by using dramatic stories to attract the attention of the audience.

Based on a cognitive distortion according with the principle of “If I feel it, it must be real,” emotion can confer a greater sense of reality on content (Konijn et al. 2011). Naturally, the most emotion-saturated programs are those in the domain of entertainment, such as sitcoms, television series, and talk shows. However, emotionalization has been gaining in importance in recent years, and for this reason it occupies an important place also in other, wholly or partly narrative, “serious” programs, such as informational and educational ones—news services, documentaries, and so forth (Bassols et al. 2013; Cros et al. 2012).

Therefore, mediatization and emotions are strictly interrelated, influencing both the way in which the media present emotions and the way audiences react to media content.

Understanding this interrelation is crucial for analyzing contemporary communication processes and their impact on society. It is difficult, however, to arrive at a clear assessment of the link. Unz believes that emotions facilitate the processing and remembering of the message. In other words, emotions do not hinder the comprehension of the message, but quite the contrary: they are its inherent element (Unz 2011). For example, a victim's tears attract the attention of the audience: they are important markers that help viewers thoroughly process the information. However, other researchers do not share this view and maintain that if the emotions evoked are too strong, then comprehension and memory of the media content will be hindered. Showing immigrants in the media exclusively in negative contexts (thefts, violence, etc.) may increase negative emotions, stereotypes, and prejudice in regard to this social group (Lang et al. 1999). People do not usually take media messages uncritically. These messages, however, are key for designing programs and focusing public interest on specific topics, which limits the range of arguments and perspectives influencing public debate (Happer et al. 2013).

### **The Mediatization of Knowledge About Brexit**

After the results of the 2016 referendum were reported in newspapers, on websites, and in television programs, the events connected with the process of the UK leaving the EU were broadly commented upon and interpreted. World media coverage included comments ranging from attributing racism and xenophobia to the British in connection with their decision, through concerns about the “domino effect” if other member states should follow the UK's example, to seeing Brexit as a challenge or an opportunity for the British monarchy and the Old Continent (Smaga 2017).

The media reported on the 2016 referendum campaign in an emotional way, as a conflict between reason and resentment, fear and hope, heads and hearts (Moss et al. 2020). The last description of the Brexit conflict seems particularly apt for the situation addressed in the present study. Because there is common agreement that knowledge is an essential component of attitude, it is important to ask whether the media share information in a way that allows people to develop their attitudes independently and without manipulation. It is by no means obvious that the answer to this question is affirmative. In the context of 24-hour news cycles and social media content, instant response takes precedence over careful assessment (Davies 2018). The pluralism of the media is also debatable here. The media have markedly shifted from their informational role to a manipulative one. The view that free markets generate diverse political reports that reflect the preferences of their target audiences, viewers, listeners, and readers was called into question during the referendum on Brexit and the UK's withdrawal from the EU (Gavin 2018).

The media usually cover current events in such a way, and use such selective filters, that it helps restore the domination of the social values that are at risk (Portas 2018). The purpose of such a media mechanism is to restore, or provide, a sense of security during times of social unrest. And the period when political decisions were made about Brexit was clearly such a time. Following Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 the conservative British media adopted a rather negative narrative about immigrants and the

mass influx of cheap labor from the new member states, especially from Poland. As some researchers point out, it was against the backdrop of this media discourse that an anti-Polish moral panic broke out (Fitzgerald et al. 2015). The discourse continued after 2004 and reached its culmination during the Brexit referendum in 2016. This crisis allowed the Eurosceptic parties to make political capital and to provoke more controversy over migration. The resultant social unrest and uncertainty among the domestic workforce (Klein et al. 2021) added even more fuel to the moral panic (Portas 2018).

In this article, we discuss the results of sociological research addressing the role of the media in shaping knowledge about Brexit among Polish immigrants living in the United Kingdom, where Poles are one of the largest immigrant groups. The aim is to answer the following questions: What was the role of the media compared to other sources of information (such as family, friends, etc.) in shaping the knowledge of Polish immigrants about Brexit, and what emotions did the media arouse in respondents? What emotions did Polish people have in connection with the results of the 2016 referendum and the subsequent nearly three-year-long media campaign before the UK's definitive withdrawal from the European Union?

Our study covers two important periods: we asked respondents about the year 2016 (when their knowledge about Brexit had been shaped by the referendum), and about the autumn of 2019 (when the UK definitively left the EU). As the date for Brexit was postponed several times after 2016, there was a flood of contradictory information about how this political decision would play out and what its consequences would be. Social unrest ensued. The media gave the issue an increasing amount of publicity and engaged experts such as politicians, economists, sociologists, demographers, political scientists, and others. The social tension that built up at the time was well described by British sociologist Stanley Cohen:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; (...) the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible (Cohen 2011: 9).

## Materials and Methods

### *Research design*

The analyses that follow are based on the collective results of our study, which was conducted using a group-administered questionnaire. The study was carried out in major Polish community centers in three locations. Such a method seems optimal for migration conditions, where it is difficult to reach each respondent on an individual basis. The study was conducted in September and October 2019 in London, Oxford, and Swindon. These three locations differ in terms of their urbanization structures, living conditions, living standards, and types of jobs undertaken by immigrants from Poland. In many respects, London, as the capital of the United Kingdom, is clearly the most diverse hub for the “old” and “new” Polish communities, and nearly anyone can find a job that matches their

qualifications there. The situation is different in Oxford, which has just 155,000 residents, but is a city with one of the world's best-known universities. Here, Polish people work not only as unskilled service workers but also as academic or administrative staff at the two major universities and in reputable local hospitals. Finally, Swindon is a typical industrial town. Although it has 20% more residents than Oxford, it is regarded as a town rather than a city.

The study was conducted using a questionnaire designed by the authors. For respondents to rate the degree to which different media influenced them, we provided a 6-point scale with the following extreme values: 1 = *no media influence* and 6 = *significant media influence* on the respondent's knowledge about Brexit.

### *Participants*

Our quantitative cross-sectional study involved 620 adults. The largest proportion of respondents were 31 to 40 years old (46.5%). A majority were female (62.6%). A vast majority were economically active (90.6%). Slightly more than half had a higher educa-

Table 1  
Characteristics of the study sample

		N	%
Age	≤30	78	12.6
	31–40	288	46.5
	41–50	162	26.1
	>50	61	9.8
	N/A	31	5.0
Gender	Male	218	35.2
	Female	388	62.6
	N/A	14	2.3
Professional activity	Yes	562	90.6
	No	42	6.8
	N/A	16	2.9
Education	Primary / secondary education	257	41.5
	Higher education	352	56.8
	N/A	11	1.8
Command of English	Very good	226	36.5
	Good	211	34.0
	Communicative	134	21.6
	Poor / very poor	39	6.3
	N/A	10	1.6
Financial situation	Very good	88	14.2
	Good	266	42.9
	Bad	211	34.0
	N/A	55	8.9
Length of stay [years]	<10	221	35.6
	10–15	292	47.1
	>15	85	13.7
	N/A	22	3.5

tion (56.8%). The sample included people who considered themselves fluent in English, with a very good (36.5%) or good (34%) command of it. The largest proportion of respondents were financially comfortable (42.9%). The sample was dominated by individuals who had lived in the UK for 10 to 15 years (47.1%). For details concerning the characteristics of the sample, see [Table 1](#).

### Statistical methods

Groups were compared using the Kruskal–Wallis H test and the Mann–Whitney U test. The tests were used to verify the hypothesis about the non-significance of differences between median scores on the studied variable between two or several populations, with the distributions of the variable assumed to be similar. We used IBM SPSS Statistics, v. 25.

## Results

### *The media as the key source of knowledge about Brexit among Polish immigrants*

The first stage in our analysis consisted in assessing the influence of the media on what respondents knew about Brexit. Apart from the media, we also considered other sources of knowledge, such as politicians, family, friends, and priests. The respondents were asked to assess, on a scale from 1 to 6, how the selected sources of information influenced their knowledge of Brexit. We analyzed the mean results. It emerged that the media, both Polish and international, had the greatest influence ( $M = 3.07$ ). The second leading source of information were people in the respondents' immediate environment ( $M = 2.91$ ), and the last place belonged to politicians ( $M = 2.82$ ). Detailed results are presented in [Table 2](#) below.

Table 2

**Respondents' assessment of the influence of selected sources of information on their knowledge about Brexit**

Source of knowledge about Brexit		Percentage						Descriptive statistics		Overall influence (M+/- SD)
		1	2	3	4	5	6	M	SD	
Media	Polish television	29.7	13.7	22.4	7.8	19.1	7.3	2.95	1.68	M = 3.07; SD = 1.68
	Polish radio	43.7	11.7	17.5	10.6	12.3	4.2	2.49	1.60	
	Polish social media	24.4	15.0	23.2	5.2	24.6	7.7	3.14	1.68	
	Polish press	39.4	14.8	18.2	11.2	11.4	5.1	2.56	1.60	
	British television	18.8	11.0	21.0	6.5	31.8	10.8	3.54	1.70	
	British radio	25.3	13.2	20.0	5.8	26.0	9.7	3.23	1.75	
	British social media	22.2	14.2	22.2	5.9	26.5	9.0	3.27	1.70	
	British press	25.0	12.5	19.8	7.3	25.7	9.6	3.25	1.74	
Politicians	Polish politicians	40.6	17.3	21.0	9.1	9.4	2.7	2.38	1.46	M = 2.82; SD = 1.58
	British politicians	23.0	14.0	21.2	7.1	26.2	8.5	3.25	1.70	
Other sources	Family	23.6	12.6	27.8	6.4	22.2	7.4	3.13	1.64	M = 2.91; SD = 1.55
	Friends	18.9	14.1	29.4	4.3	27.6	5.9	3.25	1.58	
	Priests	41.6	15.7	21.4	10.4	8.2	2.7	2.36	1.44	

1—No media influence, 6—Significant media influence; M—mean; SD—standard deviation

*The influence of the media on the knowledge of Polish immigrants about Brexit and their emotional response to the 2016 referendum results*

In this study, we analyzed the correlation between sources of knowledge about Brexit and the emotions of the respondents in regard to the results of the 2016 referendum. In 2019, the respondents were asked to assess the referendum in hindsight. We were interested in whether their opinions concerning the referendum had changed over time.

Our findings showed that in 2016 two thirds of Polish immigrants (64.2%) were concerned by the decision of the British people, one in four (22.9%) was indifferent, and only 3.9% of the respondents were happy about the results. The percentage of respondents who were unable to describe how they felt was 7.6%, and the proportion of missing answers was 1.3%. In 2019, a significant majority (68.3%) of respondents expressed concern over the consequences of the British people's decision—a percentage similar to three years before. The presence of such unchanged concern confirms that even though three years had passed the respondents considered that Brexit remained problematic and the future still seemed uncertain to them. We found that in 2019 the number of Polish immigrants who were indifferent had grown slightly, by nearly two percentage points (to 21.8%) compared to 2016, and satisfaction with the UK's decision to leave the EU had dropped (to 2.6%), while the proportion of respondents who were unable to take a stance on the issue had grown (the number of "hard to say" responses increased from 7.9% in 2016 to 11.3% in 2019). Ten respondents (1.6%) did not answer this question at all.

Table 3 below shows the influence of different media on the respondents' knowledge of Brexit, presented according to the respondents' emotions in connection with the 2016

Table 3

**Polish immigrants' assessment of the influence of selected media on their knowledge about Brexit and their emotional response to the 2016 referendum**

	What was your response to the results of the 2016 vote?						Statistics	
	Happy		Indifferent		Concerned		H	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
2016								
Polish traditional media (radio, television, press)	2.13	1.06	2.65	1.38	2.78	1.38	5.592	0.061
Polish social media	3.33	1.85	3.03	1.74	3.13	1.68	0.675	0.714
British traditional media (radio, television, press)	2.93	1.55	3.01	1.51	3.58	1.39	17.187	<0.001
British social media	3.52	1.83	3.01	1.74	3.31	1.67	3.765	0.152
2019								
Polish traditional media (radio, television, press)	1.53	0.74	2.49	1.34	2.87	1.40	21.001	<0.001
Polish social media	2.67	1.84	2.94	1.73	3.19	1.68	3.515	0.173
British traditional media (radio, television, press)	2.72	1.73	2.84	1.48	3.63	1.38	29.254	<0.001
British social media	3.92	1.85	2.87	1.76	3.39	1.67	10.503	0.005

*I—No media influence, 6—Significant media influence; M—mean; SD—standard deviation; H—Kruskal–Wallis test*

referendum results. This analysis was conducted for Polish and British media separately. For Polish media, the results of our retrospective study on the emotional response of the respondents to the 2016 referendum did not reveal any differences in the respondents' assessment of how the media influenced their knowledge. For 2019, we found differences in the influence of traditional media, which had had the strongest impact on the group of Polish immigrants who responded to the results of the referendum with concern.

The role of British media in shaping knowledge proved to be more complex. Groups identified on the basis of the emotions they felt in response to the 2016 referendum results differed in their evaluation of how the media influenced what they thought about Brexit, both in 2016 and in 2019. In 2016, there were statistically significant differences in the respondents' assessment of how traditional media influenced their knowledge of Brexit. As in the case of the Polish media, the share attributing the greatest role in shaping their knowledge of Brexit to the media was found among the respondents who reacted to the referendum's results with concern. In 2019, we noted that there were differences in how respondents assessed the influence of traditional and social media. For traditional media, the findings were similar to those for 2016, namely, we found the highest mean in the group of respondents who were concerned about the results of the referendum, and this suggests that traditional media had the greatest impact on shaping their knowledge about Brexit. Different results were obtained for social media, with the mean being highest for those respondents who were happy about the referendum results. In other words, the immigrants with that response believed social media to have had the greatest impact on their knowledge about Brexit.

***The influence of the media on the knowledge of Polish immigrants about Brexit and their experiences of discrimination following the 2016 referendum***

In the study, we asked Polish immigrants whether they had experienced discrimination before and/or after the 2016 referendum. What we found was extremely interesting. 21.8% of the immigrants had had such an experience before the referendum, while after the referendum the proportion was 29.2%. Moreover, we were interested to learn whether individuals

Table 4

**Polish immigrants' assessment of the influence of selected media on their knowledge about Brexit according to their experience of discrimination following the 2016 referendum**

Source of knowledge about Brexit	Have you experienced any kind of discrimination against Polish people by the British following the 2016 Brexit referendum?				Statistics	
	Yes		No		Z	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Polish traditional media (radio, television, press)	2.98	1.39	2.60	1.34	-2.930	0.003
Polish social media	3.43	1.38	3.38	14.70	-0.219	0.827
British traditional media (radio, television, press)	3.43	1.68	3.04	1.69	-2.516	0.012
British social media	3.35	1.64	3.23	1.72	-1.177	0.239

*1—No media influence, 6—Significant media influence; M—mean; SD—standard deviation; Z—Mann–Whitney U test*



who had experienced discrimination after 2016 assessed the influence of the media on their knowledge about Brexit differently than those who had not experienced discrimination. It turned out that the Polish immigrants who had had such experiences rated the influence of traditional media, both Polish and British, on their opinions significantly higher.

***The influence of the media on the knowledge of Polish immigrants about Brexit and their predictions of possible scenarios for the UK's withdrawal from the EU***

The question asked in the autumn of 2019 about how Brexit would play out was answered as follows: 11% of the respondents believed that there would be a “soft Brexit”; 39.8% argued that Brexit would be postponed; 15.6% thought there would be a “hard Brexit”; and 12.1% believed there would be no Brexit at all. Interestingly, as many as 21.1% of respondents were unable to select any of these answers.

We were able to identify some interesting correlations between the distribution of how Polish immigrants assessed the influence of the media on their knowledge about Brexit and the Brexit scenario they considered most likely. In this analysis, we took account of the distinction between traditional and social media. We found that the mean assessment of the influence of British social media on Brexit-related knowledge was highest among the respondents who believed that Brexit would be postponed ( $M = 3.45$ ). In other words, the group of respondents who believed that Brexit would be postponed thought that British social media had played the greatest role in shaping their knowledge about Brexit. Detailed results are presented in **Table 5** below.

Table 5

**Polish immigrants' assessment of the influence of the media on their knowledge about Brexit and their predictions about the possible scenarios for the UK's withdrawal from the EU**

Source of knowledge about Brexit	In your opinion, what is the likely scenario for the UK's leaving of the EU?						Statistics	
	It will be a “soft Brexit”		Brexit will be postponed		It will be a “hard Brexit”		H	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Polish traditional media	2.64	1.41	2.72	1.31	2.96	1.64	1.241	0.538
Polish social media	3.03	1.68	3.36	1.72	3.03	1.76	3.304	0.192
British traditional media	3.12	1.37	3.42	1.38	3.49	1.50	3.452	0.178
British social media	2.75	1.61	3.45	1.72	3.14	1.66	8.173	0.017

*1—No media influence, 6—Significant media influence; M—mean; SD—standard deviation; H—Kruskal–Wallis test*

## Discussion

Our study shows that the media played a dominant role in communicating knowledge about Brexit and in this regard took precedence even over family members, politicians, and friends. The common belief that the media have become ubiquitous and permeate nearly all areas of life and that their role extends far beyond merely communicating information (Walther et al. 2021) is thus confirmed. A study conducted by Jigsaw Research in late

2018 and early 2019 showed a clear trend where, for the British, the primary source of information about global events was television programs, followed by online sources, with the TV being preferred much more often by older audiences and the reverse being true for younger audiences (Research 2019: 13–15). Richard Fletcher and Meera Selva reached more detailed conclusions. Analyzing data from the 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, they discovered that among those in favor of Brexit the primary source of information about it was television, followed by online reports (including social media); the opposite was the case among Euroenthusiasts (Richard Fletcher et al. 2019: 2). According to the 2016 Press Service Report on the presence of Brexit-related content in Polish means of social communication, the majority of publications appeared online, with much less coverage given by television, radio, or the press. A similar analysis conducted in 2019 clearly showed that it was the Internet that had become the primary source of information about the UK's withdrawal from the EU (Service 2019: 3). While our study confirms the leading role of the media in shaping what Polish immigrants in the UK know and think about Brexit, the issue is a little more complicated. As far as the Polish media are concerned, the decisive role in this respect was played by social media, while in the case of the British media, the dominant influence on shaping knowledge and opinions was attributed to traditional types of media (radio, press, television).

With the power wielded by the media comes the responsibility of journalists for the information they share. The media can, and do, portray immigrants as a problem; they point out, for example, the economic and social costs for the host society (Balabanova et al. 2010). The British media had started to fuel fears associated with the presence of immigrants before the referendum. In the British press, information about immigrants was usually reported with undertones of threat or in the context of criminal reports (Lawlor, 2015). In our opinion, the key to understanding this situation seems to be the concept of a moral panic. Following the Brexit referendum in the UK on June 23, 2016, there was an increase in crime against immigrants. Without a doubt, this was the consequence of a media discourse aimed at instilling a fear of “others,” who were considered inferior, threatening, and exploitative. Such negative emotions can lead people to feel that there is a lack of control or harmony in their environment and that there is a threat to the existing socio-political order, which can ultimately lead to permanent antipathetic beliefs about specific social groups (Kleemans et al. 2017). One of the reasons for such a discourse is that an audience's attention is more likely to be captured and kept by bad news, while good news has much more limited influence (Soroka 2003). In this context, there is considerable evidence that a moral panic was produced. For instance, the *Daily Mail* and *The Independent* fuelled the moral panic by creating suspicion in regard to “otherness,” emphasizing inequalities among individual social and ethnic groups, and referring to nationality (Martins 2021). The media are responsible for disseminating sensational representations and for perpetuating stereotypes, which in turn generates unjustified attitudes and expectations in regard to migrants (Chouliaraki 2005). Approaching the presence of migrants as a problem on the European scale is not only a way to identify the enemy but also a government technique to cause a scare and provoke anxiety and discomfort (Blinder et al. 2016). It is important to note that there had been a proliferation of anti-immigration news before the Brexit vote, such as in connection with the debate on benefit fraud. During the Brexit campaign, several

newspapers regularly and flagrantly violated journalistic standards of objectivism, integrity, and accuracy, and thus became tools of propaganda (Hinde 2017). The main arguments for and against withdrawal from the EU were related to three areas: immigration, sovereignty, and the economy. However, the importance of immigration in the media discourse gradually increased. Content in the *Daily Mail* focused on arguments for leaving the EU, and those arguments referred mainly to the possible threat from immigrants. The *Daily Mail* contributed to the Brexit campaign's shift in focus from economic issues to immigration (Chadwick et al. 2018). Some British media outlets had already played a prominent role in promoting racism and xenophobia prior to the UK referendum. Unfavorable publicity about immigrants coincided with an increase in the number of recorded nationality-based, ethnic, and cultural crimes (Mcguire 2019). Many studies have shown that a negative portrayal of immigrants in the media reinforces stereotypical attitudes within the host society (Schemer 2013). In our study, we also demonstrated that Polish people experienced more discrimination after the referendum. The individuals who experienced violence or hate were more likely to rate the influence of traditional media on shaping their knowledge about Brexit higher (Table 4).

Our study did not analyze media coverage in terms of its content. We adopted a slightly different research approach. We were interested in learning what Polish immigrants thought about the role of the media in shaping their knowledge and emotions about Brexit. The literature on the subject emphasizes the strong correlation between an audience's emotions and how its members process political information and make political decisions (Gaber et al. 2022). Individuals who are afraid of something are more likely to look for additional information about the thing they fear. Anger leads to biased consumption of information or greater reliance on habit (Parker et al. 2010). Political news presented by the mass media produces emotions rather than a critical assessment of political institutions and actors (Melchior et al. 2023). The immediate emotional response takes precedence over careful evaluation (Davies 2018). In our study, we sought to answer the question of whether there was a relationship between the influence of selected types of media on what Polish immigrants knew about Brexit before the 2016 referendum and the emotions they experienced after it. In other words, we were interested in whether the emotions they experienced in response to the referendum (happiness, indifference, concern) differed depending on their assessment of the influence of specific media on their knowledge about Brexit. The group of respondents who felt negative emotions rated the influence of the media on shaping their Brexit-related knowledge the highest. On the one hand, journalistic content influenced the reactions of the respondents in line with the narrative used for media communication, but on the other hand, the emotions aroused by political events influenced attitudes toward the media. Therefore, the correlation needs to be considered both ways. In our study, we found that those individuals whose response to the Brexit referendum was concern relied on the media for their knowledge to a greater extent than did others. This shows that the media can reinforce attitudes and that people actually choose the media that communicate specific content along with interpretations of political messages (Anderson 2016). Scholars have emphasized that "the media can have complex, multi-layered, longer term (and definitely not insubstantial) impacts on citizens, not least with regard to the creation of significant, politically important, misperceptions among electorates" (Gavin

2018). Because if the media only reinforce attitudes, where do attitudes come from in the first place? The media largely influence what people think and shape their political preferences and opinions (Entman 2010). Our study was conducted in 2019, three years after the referendum. Even though some time had passed, immigrants were unable to foretell with certainty what the status of the UK in regard to the EU would be. Our study shows that in the autumn of 2019 approximately 10% of the respondents believed Brexit would not happen. We were interested in whether the future they expected for the UK was connected with how they assessed the influence of the media. The affirmative answer to this question suggests that the respondents' assessment of the influence exerted by the media differs depending on their predictions about Brexit-related developments (though statistically significant differences were found only for British social media). While it would seem that, over time, the media would provide reliable information about Brexit, the withdrawal process, and the consequences, our findings challenge this view. Our comparative analysis of (retrospective) attitudes toward Brexit in 2016 and 2019 showed that the media had played a significant role in communicating knowledge about Brexit for individuals whose response to the referendum results was concern. This finding, however, refers to traditional media only. The situation is different with social media. It is believed that the Internet reinforces preexisting political views (Himmelboim et al. 2013). Political parties, electoral candidates, and politicians use social media increasingly often to address their constituents directly while bypassing the mainstream media (Ross et al. 2021). It is difficult to imagine any political campaign entirely omitting social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X) (Caton et al. 2015). Campaigns emphasize emotional content and visualizations that are aimed at voters across all levels of political involvement (Magin et al. 2017). There is a clear correlation between content characteristics and reach. For instance, negative or emotive content makes it more likely for a post to become viral (Bene 2017). Donald Trump's campaign is cited in the literature as an example (Verboord et al. 2023). Scholars have suggested that, very much like Brexit supporters, Trump's supporters construct their knowledge on the basis of communication saturated with negative emotions (Moss et al. 2020). It is important to note that during the 2012 elections in the USA both Mitt Romney and Barack Obama used emotional communication in about 50% of their Facebook posts (Bronstein 2013). However, a more detailed analysis of Obama's campaign shows that those posts were largely based on hopeful, enthusiastic emotional messages to potential supporters (Gerodimos et al. 2015). Social media are conducive to the emergence of what is known as "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles"—mechanisms causing social media users with similar worldviews to focus on sources of information that support their views (Galent 2017). The knowledge that reaches such users is filtered and organized (Lynn et al. 2020). New media have not only become an important source of information about the world in general, but have also started to serve as many people's primary reference for information about the world of politics, which in turn serves as their basis for formulating judgements and opinions (Galent 2017).

Our study has its limitations. Because the research was conducted on a non-representative convenience sample, and because it is not even possible to compare the sample's socio-demographic composition to the general population of Polish immigrants in the United Kingdom, the study has to be treated as only exploratory and its results—though interest-

ing—as inconclusive. Our research does, however, contribute to an area that has not been deeply explored by scholars. There are few studies that address the issue of media influence on the perception of Brexit among Polish immigrants living in the UK. In the context of our study, a direction for further research emerges: to what extent does media content influence the decisions of Polish immigrants concerning their residence in the UK? Interdisciplinary research on this issue is needed.

## Conclusions

In our study, we demonstrated that Polish immigrants who were happy about the results of the 2016 referendum believed that social media had played the greatest role in building their knowledge about Brexit. These findings support the hypothesis that there are significant positive relations between the use of social media and political participation and knowledge—for example, during electoral campaigns (Boulianne 2009). Social media provide many diverse opportunities for political engagement, such as participation in debates, blogging, or activity on forums (Bossetta et al. 2023). Compared to traditional media, social media certainly makes it easier to gain access to multiple sources of news online at any time and place (Palmer et al. 2022). The Internet provides a wealth of information about politics and citizen affairs, and can help better inform the electorate (i.e., the Internet’s sharing of information and experience enables voters to take a broader perspective on issues of interest to them). But social media can also be used to manipulate or to build a narrative that effectively serves specific political actors. We did not investigate this issue in our study. We demonstrated, however, that people who were happy about the results of the referendum believed that social media had played the greatest role in shaping their knowledge about Brexit.

Our study was conducted in the autumn of 2019, and Brexit eventually came into effect a few months later. The immigrants who believed that Brexit would be postponed attributed the greatest influence on shaping their knowledge about Brexit to social media. It is important, however, to ask whether such media, highly personalized as they are, only communicate and interpret the public debate or whether they perhaps rather create it. The users of new media are taking—on a mass scale—the opportunity to become online commentators, engage in grassroots cooperation networks, share knowledge, and collaboratively create content that is published online (Juza 2021). As it turned out, the belief expressed in the autumn of 2019 about Brexit being postponed was misguided. It is difficult to determine why such a belief arose. Perhaps the intuition of users of new media simply failed. Another possible explanation is that a kind of culpable ignorance resulted from the respondents having built and maintained a narrow view of reality. It is possible they did not consider more universal accounts and diversified sources that are not limited by algorithms creating an “alternative reality” and serving as filters or by moderators who contextualize information only to generate interest and encourage content sharing (Wojcieszak et al. 2023). What emerges from the situation is a new quality of political discourse that is clearly fostered by low costs on the part of content creators and recipients, and the coexistence of vertical and horizontal communication (Stefanowicz 2011).

The growing importance of social media as a source of news and information aligns with the mediatization processes. Social media are part of the changing ecosystem by means of which politicians, journalists, and citizens communicate. Users can adjust their information environment by choosing whom they “follow” and whom they contact; this trend is further reinforced by social media algorithms that optimize certain types of content on the channels of users. Social media liberate their users from the mediation that is definitive of traditional media (Šimunjak 2022). Our study also showed that social media had a significant impact on shaping knowledge and emotions of Polish immigrants in regard to Brexit, which in turn influenced their perceptions and experiences after the referendum. Deriving knowledge from these media has its specificity. Research has shown the impact that headlines have on individuals’ well-being: the intensification of emotions depends on the positive or negative polarity of the words used in the headlines (Mousoulidou et al. 2024).

## Declarations

### *Ethical approval and consent to participate*

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee.

### *Availability of data and materials*

The datasets used and analyzed during the current study are available from the authors on reasonable request.

### *Competing interests*

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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