ETHNIC IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE IN THE DIGITAL CULTURE: A STUDY OF THE "ETHNICIZED" BRITONS.

Hassen ZRIBA

iD **: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7968-0229**

University of Gafsa, Tunisia

ABSTRACT

The discursive relationships between language and identity have been problematic. It is a generally accepted wisdom that the two concepts are closely interrelated by which I mean that language reveals one's identity and identity colors one's language. However, in the contemporary digital culture, such a language-identity relation acquires additional importance and complexity. Yet, if we study language-identity relations within multi-ethnic and multicultural contexts, like that of contemporary Britain, further problems originate. Hence, a fundamental hypothesis of this article is that the digitalization of language and identity creates further niches to alternative expressions of ethnic identities through specific linguistic constructions. I test this hypothesis within the British multicultural context.

This study is based on a representative corpus extracted from different social media that are, or claim to be, related to ethnic issues in Britain. The research employed method is an electronic questionnaire which yielded a number of interesting results.

ARTICLE INFO

ARTICLE HISTORY

KEYWORDS

Introduction

At the onset of the twenty-first century, it has been a widely acknowledged fact that technology and technological inventions have metamorphosed the world in manifolds, exciting and unforeseen ways (Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop, 2004). Almost, technology with its dazzling inventions and manifestations permeated every aspect of our contemporary life. Web-based technology is pivotal in such a metamorphosis. Hence, web users' behaviors, conduct, and identities have witnessed drastic alterations. The new digital spaces changed the conventional ways of language use and identity expression.

The discursive relationships between language and ethnic identity have been problematic. It is a generally accepted wisdom that the two concepts are closely interrelated by which I mean that language reveals one's identity and identity colors one's language. However, in the contemporary digital culture, such a language-identity relation acquires additional importance and complexity. Yet, if we study language-identity relations within multi-ethnic and multicultural contexts, further challenges originate. Hence, a fundamental hypothesis of this study is that the digitalization of language and identity creates further niches for alternative expressions of ethnic identities through specific linguistic constructions. I test this hypothesis within the British multicultural context. Though considerably reliant on linguistic discursive approaches, this article is basically on the cultural meanings of the potential uses of language in the expression of ethnic identities within increasingly multicultural/multilinguistic communities.

Research questions

This interdisciplinary article explores the role played by traditional cultures in the evolving expressions, practices, and images of race and ethnicity in the digital age. The work examines cultural forms in exclusively digital environments as well as in the hybrid environments created by mobile technologies, where reallife becomes overlaid with digital content.

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- *How is the relationship between language and identity understood and conceptualized by the users of digital spaces?*
- *To what extent do offline cultural repertoires influence the online articulations of the users?*
- *How do British ethnic minorities use the new expressive features of digital spaces to experience, represent, discuss, and debate their identities?*
- *How have digital technologies or digital spaces become racialized?*

Literature review

Digital representations of social identity have gathered momentum. Many scholars examined the impact of digital media on social spaces that contribute to enacting the contemporary understandings of digital identity, mainly when related to ethnic variables (Bak Buccitelli, 2017).In today's connected world, ethnic identity and digital media are strongly related. The relevant literature approached the impact of digital media on ethnic minorities in particular from two different perspectives: the empowering social constructivist perspective (Bak Buccitelli, 2017, Cairo, 2014, Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop, 2004) and the disempowering technological determinist one (Feezell, 2016, Hargittai and Hinnant 2008, Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017)

From a social constructivist perspective, digital media has made it possible for people and groups to express and celebrate their ethnic identities in new ways, as well as to engage with and learn from one another. In general, social media platforms facilitated the articulation of ethnic identities. People can, for instance, communicate with others from similar origins by exchanging pictures, films, and narratives about their cultural heritage and traditions. As a result, ethnically-based online communities have grown, enabling members to share information and debate shared experiences (Bak Buccitelli, 2017). Moreover, digital media has contributed to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. For instance, museums and other cultural institutions are leveraging digital media to offer virtual tours and exhibits, enabling people all over the world to explore and learn about various ethnic cultures and their specificities.

The voices of underprivileged ethnic groups, who have historically been underrepresented in traditional media, have also been propagated through the usage of digital media. Individuals and groups can connect with others who have had similar situations using social media and other digital platforms to share their stories and experiences. The connectivity of the experiences generates possibilities of digital

solidarities that can subvert "dominant (oppressive) cultural ideologies and norms, including racial bias" (Lee, 2017, p. 1).

Concerns exist, nevertheless, on how digital media will affect ethnic identity. For instance, the usage of algorithms and tailored content may result in people only being exposed to material that confirms their own opinions and biases. This may further polarize society's various ethnic groups and fracture society.

Seen from a technological determinist angle, other less optimistic researchers believed that social media and digital culture cannot offer authentic empowering experiences. It seems that the same relations of power that exist in the offline world will be reproduced online differentially. Thus as Hargittai and Hinnant (2008) suggested, offline-privileged users "who are already in more privileged positions are more likely to use the medium for activities from which they may benefit" (p. 615). In this context, digital experiences of ethnic populations, whatever their host communities or national origins, are routinely reproduced online. Despite some distinctive reshaping of identities, the same "real" patterns of inequality tend to survive the empowering and democratic propensities that are generated by digital spaces. Arguably, social media often reproduces the classical socio-cultural cleavages of class and racial/ethnic inequalities (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017). Matamoros-Fernandez argues that the differences that online identities of ethnic minorities adopt are often created in response to offline constraints which impact the newly-shaped digital identities (2017). So, the online-adopted identities are to a large extent an adaptation of real-life ones.

Our study of the related literature reveals that there has been no consensus on either the empowering or disempowering aspects of digital media. However, this is not a surprise given the multidimensional and complex nature of the digital experiences let alone real-life ones. Hence, in this paper, we suggest that despite the "digital constraints", digital media still offers several potentialities for ethnic minorities (in this paper the British South Asian communities) to reshuffle that game of power distribution and enjoy the fruits of equality as least virtually. In this endeavor, language looms large as a means of empowerment and identity assertion.

Methodology

The corpus of this article is based on an electronic questionnaire distributed to different social media groups that claim to be about or related to ethnic communities in Britain. Two major online groups are targeted as the sample of this article. They are

People from UK, and *Love GREAT Britain*; they were selected randomly so that the researcher's bias is lowered as much as possible. The unique criterion for the selection, however, is that the Facebook groups are British or frequented by British users. The used online platform is Typeform, which comparatively, has advanced features and tools despite its being free. For instance, Typeform, unlike other platforms, allows up to 100 respondents to send their feedback, which is a reasonable sample of the objectives of this study.

Participants

The article relies on a random sample that involved one hundred respondents online that subscribe to the Facebook groups *People from UK*, and *Love GREAT Britain*. The anticipated diversity of cultural origins and regional belongings is meant to secure an acceptable representativity of the participants. It is assumed that they should have different attitudes regarding the nature of Britishness and the relationship of the latter to the English language.

According to the received feedback, the traits of the population are as follows: 54% of the respondents were male, 75% belonged to the extended age group 18-49, and 64% of the South Asian racial category. Also, expectedly, 70% hold a South Asian religious belief (primarily Muslims and then Hindus).

Data Analysis Procedure

To the aim of this study, 100 respondents were retained. The respondents answered the questionnaire within two weeks. The data was collected online and later analyzed based on descriptive statistics and frequency distribution.

This questionnaire, along with a critical analysis of relevant literature, offered, I believe, ample data that illuminated the major theoretical assumptions of the article. However, it is crucial to state that this type of online survey and questionnaire has several shortcomings despite its considerable advantages. On the one hand, online surveys and questionnaires tend to be less expensive, less time-intensive, faster, and more accessible than other "conventional" methods. Online surveys are powerful, flexible tools that can be a great addition to research, notably the research that broaches digital phenomena. On the other hand, surveys and questionnaires may not be appealing to the targeted population. The absence of the research may discourage

respondents to fill out the surveys commendably. Yet, the problem of the verification of the identity of the respondents remains the most remarkable problem with online surveys and questionnaires. Despite the use of stringent identity verification, most online surveys will include, variably, some bogus respondents. However, despite those shortcomings, online surveys and questionnaires' benefits still circumvent their drawbacks.

Analysis and Discussion

The expression of ethnic identity through virtual outlets offers unlimited possibilities for cultural articulation. These e-possibilities would create a cordial lingua franca of multicultural and multi-ethnic syncretism, generating multiple sources of identification and socio-cultural empowerment. The virtual space is, in many respects, empowering and secures a sort of flexibility so much needed by the British ethnic minorities. They seem to enjoy greater freedom of expression and more command over their discursive formations.

The conducted questionnaire yielded several findings. Overall, it seems that language is a prime source of identity and identification in contemporary British society. In our survey, 67 % of the respondents affirmed that English in particular, and language, in general, constitute a fundamental and even constitutive aspect of British national identity. Moreover, they agree that Britishness is a source of identification for the large majority of British ethnic groups. Hence, 80 % regard Britishness as more an ethnic identity than a civic one. The diagram below states a detailed account of the questionnaire's data. The question was "Do you consider English a constitutive element of Britishness?" and the answers were as follows:

Diagram 1: Relationship between the English language and British identity

This is not a surprising finding anyway. Yet, it confirms the fact that multiculturalism and language politics are closely related; they feed each other. Hence, no multiculturalism is tenable without the full recognition of the validity of the languages of the different ethnic minorities constitutive of the multilinguistic mosaic of Britain. Language is, hence, a vital medium through which social agents experience and relate to their environments. Bonny Norton explained this crucial relational aspect of language and identity. He wrote that identity is understood as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (2013, p. 45). Identity is then a constitutive concept of the human consociation and language is vital in such a consociation. There has been a wealth of literature that deals with the nature, aspect, and future of the relationship between language and identity (Pavlenko, A. and Blackledge, A. (Eds). 2004).

Another crucial concern was the nature of British national identity or Britishness. There are different conceptualizations of the nature and character of Britishness. I investigate some of those conceptions briefly. In September 2002, BBC News produced an article in which the editor analyzed the meanings and dimensions of the concept of Britishness. One fundamental question was "Apart from the sea, what keeps the British together?" (BBC News, 2002). The article is entitled "What is Britishness anyway?" and it attempts to present the various conceptualizations of the British national identity. The article argues that the concept of identity in general and Britishness, in particular, are not easy to understand let alone define and explain. It is postulated that "there are so many definitions of what "Britishness" is" (2002). It is shown that, in general, the issue of Britishness gathered momentum with the arrival of different ethnic minorities to Britain. Hence, Lord Tebbit, commenting on the racial aspect of the concept, suggested that "Nobody used to talk about Britishness in the 1940s and 1950s; it is a phenomenon of large numbers of non-British people coming into the country. The question is about foreigners and how foreigners are persuaded to adopt British customs and styles." (BBC News, 2002). It appears that the concept of Britishness is so entrenched within the political and cultural discourses of British race relations. The concept has powerful racial overtones.

Yet, another important aspect of the issue was broached in the article; that is the political and civil dimension of Britishness. After all, the then British Home Secretary David Blunkett adopted the ideological assumptions of the notorious "Cricket Test" to suggest that Britishness is a civil and political identity more than a racial and ethnic one. The cricket test, also known as the Tebbit test, was a controversial policy introduced in April 1990 by the British Conservative politician Norman Tebbit to

check and measure the loyalty of immigrants and their children to the British national identity and British cultural system. Arguably, David Blunkett suggested that such a test is a possible indicator of the level of integration in the central value system. The values, he talked about, were mainly political and civil not explicitly cultural. Hence the definition of the British national identity has been a hard task. The elements of that identity were multifarious. I present a non-official consideration of the concept of Britishness.

The race equality thinks tank Runnymede Trust published a report entitled *The Future of Multicultural Britain* (2000) also known as the *Parekh Report*. The report constructed Britishness in terms of cultural diversity and ethnic heterogeneity. The Parekh Report is composed of three major parts. The first part, entitled "A Vision for Britain", is of vital importance since it tries to rethink the foundations and contours of British identity.   The report in general was engaged in revising and "Rethinking the National Story" to highlight its inclusive and multi-ethnic character. The report stresses the fact that Britain just like all other nations and communities is an "imagined community". The "imagined-ness" is set against the essentialist and static conceptions and constructions of national identities. The logic is that if the nation is imagined it can be re-imagined. The identities out of which the community is composed are in a state of flux or to use the report's phrase "identities in transition". (Ibid, p. 27).

Historically, the report shows that all the historical events and acts, upon which an understanding of traditional Britishness was based, were neither unanimous nor unproblematic. For instance, the Act of Settlement (1701) and the Act of Union (1801) were, according to the report, "continually contested". Parekh criticizes the unidirectional and race-oriented concept of Britishness. He stresses that conventional conceptualizations of the notion/nation are systematically constructed to include the mainstream white majority while excluding the other non-white minorities. He writes:

> *"Britishness, as much as Englishness has systematic, largely unspoken racial connotations"*[1], *and he added that for those non-white minorities, whose native countries were once under the British imperial system, "Britishness is a reminder of colonization and empire"*(Parekh, p. 28).

However, Parekh argues that compared to Englishness, Britishness is a preferred source of identification for them as Englishness entails whiteness. Ethnic minorities tend to combine Britishness with other identities, thus, creating what can

be called hyphenated identities such as British Indians, British Muslims, and so on. Parekh and his group consider that 21st-century Britain is at a crossroads regarding its identity. They declare:

> *"Britain confronts a historic choice as to its future direction. Will it try to turn the clock back, digging in, defending old values and ancient hierarchies, relying on a narrow English-dominated, backward-looking definition of the nation? Or will it seize the opportunity to create a more flexible, inclusive, cosmopolitan image of itself? Britain is at a turning point. But it has not yet turned the corner. It is time to make the move".*(Ibid, p. 15)

For Parekh, the concept of Britishness is "less unified, more diverse and pluralistic, than imagined" (Ibid, p. 36) which means that ethnic minorities with their diverse cultures can take part and find a place in the imaginings of British national identity. Just as British national identity is dynamic and diverse so are those of ethnic minorities; they make up heterogeneous and multidimensional entities.

What Parekh lays down in his report is an attempt to refine and redefine the concept of Britishness to stress its pluralist and civic character. This makes the concept more dynamic and inclusive. Civic values are considered the basis of this new Britishness. In multicultural Britain, cultural difference is recognized and thus there has been a gradual shift from a mono-cultural Britishness to a multicultural one. The report stresses six tasks that are to be addressed. These tasks are:

> *"* the need to rethink the national story and national identity;*
> ** the need to recognise that Britain comprises a range of 'majority'*
> *and 'minority communities which are internally   diverse and*
> *which are changing;*
> **the need to strike a balance between the need to treat people equally,*
> *the need to respect the differences, and the need to maintain shared*
> *values and social cohesion;*
> **the need to address and remove all forms of racism;*
> **the need to reduce economic inequalities;*
> **the need to build a pluralist human rights culture."*
>
> (Parekh quoted in Pilkington 2003, pp.265-266).

Indeed, the *Parekh Report* is a turning point in the definition of British identity. It is to use Pilkington's phrase "Radical Hour" (Pilkington, 2003) in which a new reading of British identity and history is to emerge. According to Parekh,

multiculturalism has to be acknowledged as an irreversible fact in contemporary Britain. The new multi-ethnic Britain is accordingly envisaged as a "community of communities and a community of citizens" (Parekh, 2000, p. 56). Such a new conception seems to strike a balance between different concepts: cohesion, equality, and difference. Thus Britain is a community that shares common values and conceptions of the world, but it is also composed of many communities which stress its diverse nature. This co-existence of cohesion (unity) and diversity (difference) seems to make the two ends meet: the majority is satisfied by cohesion and the minorities get their diversity recognized. The myth of ethnic essentialism and distinctiveness is debunked for the sake of a new conception of race relations. Andrew Pilkington writes:

> "*Thinking of Britain as a community of communities challenges the conventional view of Britain as divided into two seemingly homogenous groupings, a White majority, and ethnic minorities, and urges us instead to recognise that Britain comprises a number of fluid, overlapping and internally diverse national, regional and ethnic communities which cut across any simple majority/minority division*" (Pilkington, p. 266).

To conclude the *Parekh Report* is an attempt to revise race relations in contemporary Britain with a special focus on the irreversibility of the multicultural nature of the nation. With the formula of Britain as "a community of communities and a community of citizens", the report presents a new understanding of the cultural and ethnic realities that emphasized diversity while asking for a set of common values that preserve the inter-and intra-cohesiveness of Britain. What we can deduce from this brief account of the definitions and meanings of the concept of identity in general and British identity in particular, is that no comprehensive definition is tenable and no claims of objectivity or scientificity are plausible.

Back to the findings of the questionnaire, the respondents believe that Britishness is more cultural than civic. The cultural parameters of identity seem to exceed its civil or political components. The diagram below presents the various attitudes to the question: "Is Britishness a cultural or civic identity?" This yes/no question narrows down the multidimensional nature of the British national identity into a binary structure to check the validity of official claims that Britishness is mostly a political and civil identity.

There is a dominant discourse that argues for the cultural nature of Britishness. Our representative sample confirms this fact. The digital consideration and expression of ethnic and cultural identity do not impact the nature of such an identity in considerable ways. Only 40% of our respondents declare that web-based spaces

offered more flexibility in the expression of their ethnic identity. 60% of the sample either reject or doubt such flexibility.
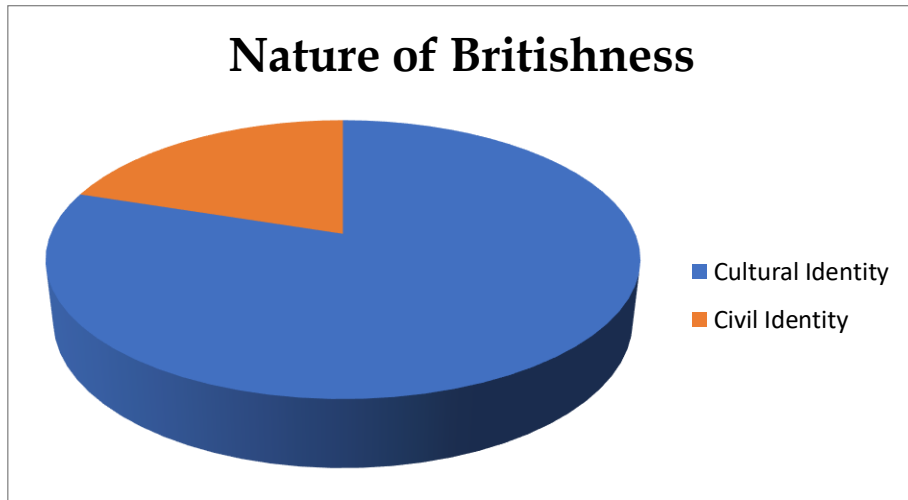
Diagram 2: The nature of the British national identity

One major drawback of the digital formation and expression of ethnic identity (and, in fact, any identity) is the increasing absence of face-to-face and real interaction of social and cultural agents. Hence, the digital experience is greatly contingent on the constraints of the digital world. There seems to be a new mode of communication and interaction that can be called "Textlationship"[2] that demolishes any authentic human interaction. Such a Textlationship is exclusively based on digital contacts which diminishes the possibilities of real-life social changes.

Conclusion

This article is a critical interpretive reading of the ways British ethnic minorities expressed their ethnic identities within a multicultural British society. It is shown that identity and language play crucial roles in the processes of ethnic identification both online and in real-life conditions.

Despite the cultural and linguistic diversity of contemporary Britain, our questionnaire affirms the claims that Britain is still regarded as a predominantly white and monocultural community. It appears that British multiculturalism is a mere

---

[2] A relationship or association between people who text each other frequently, but rarely if ever interact with each other directly and in person.

political ideology for political and media consumption while the realities of the field confirm the hegemony of the British WASP[3] identity and culture.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Contact Information
E-mail: hassen_zriba@yahoo.fr

---

[3] This acronym stands for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

References and notes:

Bak Buccitelli, A. (2017).*Race and Ethnicity in Digital Culture: Our Changing Traditions, Impressions, and Expressions in a Mediated World*, Westport: Praeger.

Cairo, A. (2014). "Managing employees in a social media technology workplace ». *N. Z. Manag. 61*, 21.

Fairclough, N. (2003).*Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. New York: Routledge.

Hargittai, E., & Hinnant, A. (2008). Digital inequality: Differences in young adults' use of the Internet. Communication Research, 35(5), 602–621.Kress, G. (1990) "Critical Discourse Analysis," Robert Kaplan, ed., Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, II.

Elgamri, E. (2008).*Islam in the British Broadsheets: The Impact of Orientalism on Representations of Islam in the British Press*. Reading, UK: Ithaca Press.

Feezell, J. T. (2016). Predicting online political participation: The importance of selection bias and selective exposure in the online setting. *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(3), 495–509.

Janks, H. (2007). "Critical Discourse Analysis as a Research Tool", University of the Witwatersrand: Johannesburg, South Africa, 2007. (http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/cslplc/documents/cdaresrchfnl.pdf) retrieved in 22/02/2008.

Lee, L, . A. (2017). Black Twitter: A response to bias in mainstream media. *Social Sciences*, 6(1), Article 26.

Matamoros-Fernandez, A. (2017). Platformed racism: The mediation and circulation of an Australian race-based controversy on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Information, Communication & Society, 20(6).Norton, B. (2013) *Identity and Language Learning: Extending the Conversation*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Mehra, B; Merkel, C; and Bishop, A. (2004) "The Internet for Empowerment of Minority and Marginalized Users' *New Media & Society* 6 (6):781-802.

Parekh, B. (ed). (2000). *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*. London: The Runnymede Trust.

Parekh, B. quoted in Pilkington, A. (2003) *Racial disadvantage and Ethnic Diversity in Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan: London, pp 265-266.

Pavlenko, A. and Blackledge, A. (Eds). (2004) *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Pilkington, A. (2003) *Racial disadvantage and Ethnic Diversity in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wodak, R. (1989) *Language, Power, and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse*. Amsterdam: Benjamin's Publishing.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire sample

Thank you for taking part in this questionnaire! That means a lot to the researcher in question. Please, be sure that your data and expressed attitudes will be confidential and will be used exclusively for academic reasons.

1) Age

Which category below includes your age?
- 17 or younger
- 18-20
- 21-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60 or older

2) Race
Are you White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or some other race?

- White
- Black or African-American
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander
- From multiple races
- Some other race (please specify)

3) Religion
What is your religion?
- Christian
- Muslim
- Jew
- Buddhist
- Sikh
- Atheist

- Other (specify please)

```


```

4) Gender
What is your gender?
- Female
- Male
- Other (specify)

```


```

5) Marital status
Are you now married, widowed, divorced, separated, or never married?

- Married
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Never married

6) Education
What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than a high school degree
- High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- Somecollege but no degree
- Associatedegree
- Bachelordegree
- Graduatedegree

7) Employment
Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?

- Employed, working 1-39 hours per week
- Employed, working 40 or more hours per week
- Not employed, looking for work
- Not employed, NOT looking for work
- Retired
- Disabled, not able to work

8) Householdincome

How much total combined money did all members of your household earn in 2018?

- $0 – $9,999
- $10,000 – $19,999
- $20,000 – $29,999
- $30,000 – $39,999
- $40,000 – $49,999
- $50,000 – $59,999
- $60,000 – $69,999
- $70,000 – $79,999
- $80,000 – $89,999
- $90,000 – $99,999
- $100,000 or more

9) Is the English language a prime source of identity and identification?

- Yes,
- No
- Don't know
- Other

10) "Do you consider English a constitutive element of Britishness?

11) Is Britishness a cultural identity?

- Yes,
- No
- Don't know
- Other

12) Is Britishness a civic identity?

- Yes,
- No
- Don't know
- Other

Thank you for your participation!