"Media is absolutely disgusting": Emotions and affect towards political elites, information sources and conspiracy theories in anti-lockdown protests

Billur Aslan Ozgul [a],[*],[1] , Ozge Ozduzen [b],[1] , Bogdan Ianosev [c],[1]

[a] *Department of Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University of London, UK*
[b] *School of Sociological Studies, Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, UK*
[c] *Institute for Democracy, Matej Bel University, Slovakia*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Using a unique dataset collected through ethnographic observations and interviews at six anti-lockdown protest sites, this article examines concrete emotions across different stages of the anti-lockdown protests in London, shedding light on the broader affective anti-lockdown protest atmosphere. Our study contributes to a nuanced understanding of protest movements in times of emergency by demonstrating how the distinct feelings of "distrust" and "disillusionment" in reaction to political elites, information and news sources can mobilise and consolidate a social movement during a crisis. We identify these long-run emotions towards official sources as crucial in fuelling short-run emotions of anger and anxiety at the pandemic's outset, mobilising and uniting protesters around alternative sources of information and conspiracy theories. Moreover, our findings show that despite their distrust towards mainstream media, protesters felt trust in alternative media and each other, assisting them to sustain positive affect during the protests. Even in the tense context of the pandemic, positive emotions such as joy were also fostered through the shared feeling of distrust towards political and media elites, common conspiracy theories and activists' togetherness in protest spaces, which created an evolving anti-lockdown atmosphere.

1. Introduction

In 2020 and 2021, large-scale anti-lockdown demonstrations emerged in major cities in the United Kingdom (UK) in response to a growing array of social distancing measures, health recommendations, and socio-economic constraints about the COVID-19 pandemic (Kowalewski, 2020). As with other protests in times of emergency and/or crisis, the protesters experienced a moral shock and a sudden sense of grievance vis-a-vis the health crisis and the ensuing restrictions (Della Porta, 2024). Yet we argue that protesters' long-run emotions of distrust and disillusionment towards political and media elites played a particularly significant role in their engagement with collective action. We examine the specific contribution of these feelings to the anti-lockdown protests' emergence, mobilisation and persistence. We argue that these emotions increased trust in alternative media sources and steered protesters to conspiracy theories, triggered short-term reactions of anger, disgust and anxiety at the outset of the protests and later evolved into discursive tools that helped protesters forge connections with each other in the long run.

These affective dispositions must be understood in the context of the broader socio-political fabric of the UK. Over recent decades, neoliberalism and neoliberal policies informed economic inequalities, social insecurity and disenfranchisement in the UK. The legacy of Thatcherism has been adapted to changing political contexts, manifested in the current financial crisis and its broad social repercussions (Jessop, 2015), with shrinking standards of living, increasing austerity measures and decreasing social protection in the rights of workers (Flinders, 2018). More recently, the divide between the political class and the majority of British people has thus deepened (Allen and Birch, 2015). The UK has also experienced a crisis of trust in political institutions (Olivas Osuna et al., 2021). The divisive and antagonistic campaigning during the EU membership referendum in the UK along with the coverage of many

---

national media outlets has instilled a sense of marginalisation, insecurity and frustration amongst both Leave and Remain supporters (Tyler et al., 2025). With less than half of the British public viewing journalists at the British Broadcasting Corporation[2] (BBC), as honest and impartial, the distrust towards mainstream media has also been increasing (Ibbetson, 2019).

Only a handful of studies on anti-lockdown protests have so far conceptualised the grievances of participants (Gerbaudo, 2020), their collective identity and politics (Ozduzen et al., 2024; Ianosev et al., 2025) and their repertoire of actions (Gerbaudo, 2020; Kowalewski, 2020). However, comprehending the dominant emotions within a social movement is essential to understanding commonalities and differences negotiated in heterogeneous social movements composed of protesters with diverse political orientations (Leinius, 2022; Grande and Gonzatti, 2025). Analysing emotions also assists us to explain protesters' goals and motivations for joining and sustaining a protest and their engagement with alternative media and conspiracy theories. Recently, Della Porta (2024) called for an orthodox social movement approach that explains how grievances transformed into collective action in anti-lockdown protests. Our study aims to delve into the emotions of anti-lockdown protesters towards news, information sources and the political elite whilst exploring the affective anti-lockdown atmosphere, through interviews and participant observations in different protest sites.

We have three interrelated key findings related to the novel COVID-19-based social movements, particularly those against lockdown policies, which are as follows: Our findings from multiple protest sites show that distrust and disillusionment towards information and news sources and the political elite activated specific emotions, which transformed into actions during the anti-lockdown protests in London. We show that when feelings of distrust were further affected by pandemic restrictions and information sources on social media platforms, the conditions became unbearable for protesters, catalysing the short-run emotions of anger and disgust. With the introduction of COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine-based travel restrictions, our research participants also increasingly experienced negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and disgust, informing their practices in the protest spaces. These negative emotions served as mobilising factors against legacy media and political elites. Feeling distrust towards political and media elites, sharing conspiracy theories and favouring alternative media connected the protesters and created feelings of joy and solidarity that are crucial for sustaining the movement. In the following sections, we first lay out our theoretical context based on emotions, affect and social movements, followed by our methodological approach. We then summarise our findings, focusing on the protesters' emotions and affect related to information, news and political elite, leading to our conclusions.

2. Theoretical framework on emotions, affective atmosphere and social movements

When we analysed the roles of emotions in protests, we found that, for early crowd theories from the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., Hoffer, 1951), emotions originated solely from irrational crowds, disconnected from personal lives and objectives of individuals. Prominent resource mobilisation and political process theorists positioned rationality in opposition to emotionality, overlooking the role of emotions as a driving force behind collective action (Goodwin and Jasper, 2006; Ellefsen and Sandberg, 2022). Contemporary studies, however, show that emotions are also central to social activism and are deeply intertwined with rational decision-making in social movements (Jasper, 2011). Emotions in the form of deep affective attachments can shape protesters' goals (Jasper, 1998). For example, positive emotions, such as joy and excitement, can play crucial roles in bringing and keeping protesters to the

streets (Aslan Ozgul, 2020), while negative emotions, such as anxiety, can cause an increased search for political information (Gadarian and Albertson, 2014). The literature on emotions also show that anxiety can facilitate the acceptance of populist narratives and conspiracy theories (Kinnvall and Svensson, 2022; Brotherton and Eser, 2014), as simple explanations that pinpoint culprits, overcome uncertainty, quell anxieties, and create emotional closure (Douglas et al., 2017). On the other hand, knowledge around the consequences of political distrust for protests is quite scarce (Grande and Gonzatti, 2024). Distrust, defined as a full lack of trust in political institutions, has recently been found to determine the sympathy for COVID-19 protests in Germany and willingness to participate in them (Grande and Gonzatti, 2024). Cushion (2023) also found that distrust in mainstream media turns protesters towards alternative media sources. These emotions also matter more when articulated collectively. Although anger, fear and distress were found to play a key role in mobilising the opponents of coal seam gas in Australia, the combination of these negative feelings with the joy of "doing community together" sustained the movement (Ransan-Cooper et al., 2018).

Asahina (2019) also argues that the role of emotions in protests is embedded in the dichotomy between short-run emotions and long-run emotions. Short-run emotions are strong and fast motivators of public action. Anger, for instance, often emerges as a sudden reaction to perceived injustice (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) and is an important source of mobilisation and empowerment (Jasper et al., 2018). Disgust, an emotion linked to avoidance and rejection of others, can also often arise quickly (Asahina, 2019). Short-run emotions can be bridged to long-run emotions, which help to maintain a movement (Asahina, 2019). In the long-run, disgust can galvanise protesters against undesirable others, such as political leaders (Ahmed, 2014) and can foster feelings of solidarity. These studies help us explain how different emotions sequentially relate to each other in anti-lockdown protests.

We are also interested in studying how collective emotions appear in anti-lockdown protests, as previous studies suggest that emotions are not merely individual feelings. Emotions are deeply embedded in the spatial, social and political contexts in which they arise (Ahmed, 2004; Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Holmes, 2010; Bericat, 2016; Cayli, 2017). For Burkitt (2017), emotions emerge and change inside social interactions and contradictory emotions are reconciled within one's immediate social circle. Moreover, solidarity allows emotions to outgrow intimate circles of family and friends to bind and maintain a movement (Somma, 2021). This emotional effervescence (Durkheim, 1995) reflects the emotional energy, power, and solidarity, resulting from large numbers of people who feel connected (Bensimon, 2012). Together protesters can produce a collective effervescence of excitement and passion (Goodwin et al., 2001). Existing studies also found that emotions emerging out of protester interactions, such as compassion and joy, tend to be more positive, whereas negative emotions such as anger and outrage tend to emerge relative to opponents (e.g., elite or the system) (Yang, 2000).

Furthermore, affective engagement within social movements goes beyond protester interactions, covering material aspects of the protests, such as slogans, banners, and shared news. Anderson (2009) coined the term affective atmosphere to understand social experiences and collective emotions forming subjectivity beyond the individual, taking account of the material, collective and subjective dimensions of the protests (Steinbeck and Munar, 2024). Affect circulates in protests as a shift in mind-body states and in the interpretations that trigger emotions, which leads to bodily synchrony amongst participants (Wall, 2019). This includes endocrine responses that manifest as distinct feelings or emotions. While concrete emotions arise out of affective atmospheres, discrete emotions may dissolve into more general tones and feelings, particularly in mass movements where participants do not experience the same emotions (Solomon, 2023). These studies help us examine the affective anti-lockdown atmosphere, which generates concrete and collective emotions through protesters' interaction and the

---

[2] The British Broadcasting Corporation, often referred to as the BBC, is the UK's public service broadcaster.

circulation of shared protest materials.

Finally, media is vital for the expression of emotions in the protests by contributing to the wider atmosphere of the protests and amplifying pre-existing emotions of anxiety, anger or hope (Jasper et al., 2018). Previous research showed that extremists, authoritarians, and populists use social media strategies to keep the populations passive, anxious, angry and/or fearful (Østbø, 2016; Doroshenko and Tu, 2022). Discursively constructed emotions thus circulate through mediated channels (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). Networked technologies embed users' affective practices on social media platforms, via posting messages, liking, sharing and commenting. Voicing feelings publicly embolden movement members (Petrini and Wettergren, 2022), enabling them to shift gradually from personal to public communication, which makes them part of affective publics (Lünenborg, 2019). Media thus offers a space in which emotions are activated and expressed (Serrano-Puche, 2015). This paper also studies how protesters' engagement with the legacy and alternative media contribute to the wider protest atmosphere.

3. Methodology

To study the affective atmosphere and specific emotions in the anti-lockdown protests, we conducted fieldwork in six anti-lockdown protests in London over a year throughout 2021 and 2022 (20 March-24 April-9 May-5 June-18 December 2021–January 2022). We observed the first three protests from start to the end to gain ethnographic familiarity with the field site, as we were not familiar with it. In the three initial field trips to the protest sites, we adopted a multi-sited ethnographic approach and along with the protesters, we moved from Hyde Park to other protest sites, such as Oxford Street. The main reason why we identified London as our interview site was that in the initial protests we attended in London, Glasgow and Bristol (Ianosev et al., 2025), we observed that anti-lockdown communities from different cities started commuting to London as London protests were the largest anti-lockdown protests in the UK. We also noticed that the London protest demographics were more diverse in comparison to other cities.

During our participation in three initial park gatherings and marches, we took field notes focusing on group interactions that contributed to an anti-lockdown group culture (Fine, 2018). We slowly accumulated an understanding of the field, based on our commitment to build and negotiate relationships with other people in the field (Lombard, 2022). We conducted thirty-three semi-structured interviews with anti-lockdown protesters in the ensuing three protests in London. In each of the fourth to sixth field trips, we interviewed protesters in different protest sites prior to, during and after the protests. The thirty-three interviewees, who came from different backgrounds and cities in the UK, were between the ages of 19–66. They worked in various professions from construction to engineering, creative sectors to education.

As discussions and ideas about news and information were central in forming and expanding anti-lockdown protests, we investigated protesters' emotions related to these sources and their relationship with other participants in the protest spaces. We aimed to capture emotions, feelings, and senses in their media engagement, performance, speeches and political actions in the physical protest spaces (Paasonen, 2021; Pink, 2015). We designed our interviews to understand the motivations of protesters to join the protests in the first place, feelings on, their thoughts about and engagement with information and news sources (coming from politicians, political parties, mainstream media, legacy and alternative social media) and their experiences of protests. Following the sensory ethnography perspective by Pink (2015), we also paid attention to multi-sensory experience and materials in the protests to have a broader understanding of interconnected senses shared by the protesters. We took photos of the banners and posters and collected objects from the protests, such as leaflets and newspapers, particularly when our research participants carried these objects with them. Our aim was to hear the voices of our participants and collect visible evidence

from the protests to understand the anti-lockdown atmosphere and the participants' sensory and affective engagement with the protests.

For our empirical analysis, we used an inductive thematic analysis method to determine the antecedents of emotional experience, which can be summarised as initial familiarisation with data; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining themes; and final analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Proudfoot, 2023). Our coding of the interviews, narratives and materials from our field notes relied on looking for "emotive vocabulary" in the data (e.g., love, hate, good) and affective items that do not include words from emotive vocabulary (e.g., how protesters say specific things, pause, roll eyes, use a mixture of words reflecting their emotions). We also studied our field notes focusing on affective encounters between protesters and the protesters' affective engagement with the protest spaces. All interviewees participated in our research pseudo-anonymously. We used a pseudonym for each participant and did not reveal any personal information of the participants including gender, ethnicity and occupation to protect their privacy.[3]

4. Findings: emotions behind the anti-lockdown protests

4.1. Long-run emotions of distrust and disillusionment galvanising the protests

We identified two inceptive emotional dynamics standing out as important for our research participants prior to joining the physical protest spaces: feelings of distrust and disillusionment. Political distrust might be described as a relational attitude or feeling that reflects perceptions of untrustworthiness specific to the political system in its entirety or its components, based on many factors, including the perceived distance between civil society and political institutions (Rosanvallon and Goldhammer, 2008). To have a broader understanding of their feelings about political institutions, we first asked about protesters' past voting practices. Their distrust for political institutions was illustrated in the following quotes:

> Abel: I don't vote. I've never since a young age. I've never really believed in it, to be honest..because whatever side goes in they never keep their word.

> Hannah: My area has always been a Labour[4] area. I mix it up a bit, sometimes I voted for Labour and sometimes Lib Dems.[5] I am really disillusioned though, I read the other day that what is worse than a one party government is a two party government. I feel really disillusioned by politics.

> Brian: I don't have any party affiliations but I am a keen voter. I have always been disillusioned with the party I have been voting for. I voted for David Kurten [UKIP] for the London mayoral elections as I have seen him doing things [protests] like this out here.

As these quotes show, beyond reacting to the Conservative government, participants also showed discontent with the wider political mainstream in the UK, which they viewed as proposing similar solutions to socio-political problems, including problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This political distrust and disillusionment was not new, interviewees often described a long-standing detachment from politics and sustained distrust of authorities and institutions, perceiving the mainstream as distant and irrelevant to their lives. Political distrust towards

---

[3] Our research findings did not reveal important differences based on gender, race and ethnicity of the research participants. We therefore do not disclose this information here.

[4] Often referred to as Labour, the Labour party is a centre-left political party in the UK.

[5] The Liberal Democrats, commonly known as the Lib Dems, are a liberal democratic party in the UK.

the political establishment was also evident in the common banners and chants in the protests such as "end this dictatorship" or "when tyranny becomes law, rebellion becomes duty".

Our interviewees also distrusted mainstream media already before the pandemic. When asked what they thought about mainstream media's coverage of events, they responded:

> Kate: I have not even got TV. I stopped following the news years ago.

> Florian: I never trusted them. And never in my life I trusted them so everything that comes out there, I always see them as staged.

Despite their distrust in mainstream media, our participants were active and engaged social media users who proactively sought information about the pandemic on alternative social media platforms. Claire said:

> No, I don't watch the news, the news is just lies, lies, lies … I don't read the newspapers, lies, lies, lies … If I want to know something, I would be searching for it myself.

Claire resonated with our participants' inclination towards "doing their own research", rather than engaging with already existing news stories, which is identified here as lies. Previous studies showed that distrust towards mainstream media often turns the public towards alternative media (Cushion, 2023; Andersen et al., 2021). Alex recounted:

> These doctors on the Internet have been discredited because they don't follow the official narrative. There are so many platforms you can get this (alternative) information.. Just switch off the BBC, switch off the television.

Alex, like other interviewees, positioned a binary opposition between discredited doctors and mainstream media content in expressing distrust towards BBC News (e.g., BBC acting in accordance with the government). Other participants recounted that they still consumed mainstream media, but "with a grain of salt". Elly mentioned "I watched mainstream media [throughout the pandemic] to see what fear factor the channels are putting to people". This highlights our participants' disbelief in mainstream media content even though they might have engaged with it. While alternative media content can enrich the diversity of the media landscape and promote pluralism, widespread distrust of mainstream news could also pose risks to democratic processes (Hameleers et al., 2022). Most alternative media organisations have small organisational structures forcing them to concentrate on a limited range of topics (Aslan Ozgul and Veneti, 2021). Moreover, those who post political content on social media are more prone to use these platforms to offer a counter-narrative or a counter-public to mainstream media (Boulianne et al., 2024). This implies that our interviewees would rarely find themselves on the path of attitude-discrepant information.

Protesters also turned to "touching" alternative media content, confirming their distrust towards official sources. Brian was "touched by" a video shared by Dr John Lee, depicting the general public as being endangered by elites:

> There is a really good documentary on YouTube and Facebook, by Dr John Lee. It is a 44 minute documentary … It is brilliant. I have shown it to my friends and family. They said "oh dear" it looks a bit different. I have yet to convince them of "Great reset[6]" and they should be here doing things like this [refers to the protests].

When engaging with the uncertainties of the pandemic, people might have trusted their government, turned to their local community, or turned to conspiracy theories to make sense of the illness (Zinn, 2021). Our findings indicate that the anti-lockdown protesters in the UK turned

to more familiar online spaces and content, where they could negotiate mainstream discourses and receive alternative health information from perceived like-minded users such as Dr John Lee. We argue that this led to the formation of new communities, which, following Bertuzzi (2021), we call conspiracy coalitions. Conspiracy coalitions occur when conspiracy mobilisations assume a collective dimension, bringing together different political claims, motivations and societal actors (Bertuzzi, 2021). In the anti-lockdown protests, these coalitions first emerged in online spaces generating shared responses to information, misinformation and disinformation sources and then in physical protest spaces resting on the collective expression of distrust and disillusionment towards scientific evidence at the time. These conspiracy coalitions shaped the evolution of the anti-lockdown protest atmosphere.

4.2. Anger and disgust towards elites

At the pandemic's onset, existing distrust in elites and mainstream media turned into disbelief about the pandemic's severity and scope. Participants joined the protests as socio-economic and medical restrictions made the pandemic unbearable and deepened their sense of alienation. They saw the measures as exaggerated or driven by a hidden elite agenda. The feeling of distrust towards political elites and news sources transformed into anger with the introduction of restrictions. Anger is a social emotion that can result from an insufficiency in or reduction to one's power (Jasper, 2011).

Feeling oppressed by restrictions, Darren recounted:

> I just had enough basically. If I can go to work, I can go shopping, I want to go to see my family, it is like shutting the kebab shops down at 10 o'clock (instead of 11pm). What does that do?

Protesters directed the blame of social isolation towards the ambivalent and ever-changing pandemic policy in the UK, which made them feel not only socially alienated from their communities, but also angry towards the government and establishment.

Anger is also typically triggered by a sense of unfairness (Cass and Walker, 2009; Fitouchi et al., 2022). Protesters were angry about social distancing measures, which they saw as unfair and unnecessary. Tom said:

> I have always been against the COVID hoax. I always thought it is absolutely rubbish but we fortunately, carried on working. We had to do all these ridiculous restrictions. We couldn't cashier with somebody, but you can stand next to them and work, it is an utter ridiculous thing, and I wear pointless masks, I wore them at work.

Distrusting official information, Tom believed the restrictions had been ineffective. This created the feeling of frustration and anger towards the precautions, leading Tom to delegitimize COVID-19 and the related restrictions, by defining them as "hoax" and "ridiculous".

Over time, when these measures eased and more protesters came together and bonded with like-minded communities in physical protest spaces, we started to overhear conversations, see banners, and audit slogans about the "vaccine mandate" (e.g., no vaccine passports). When asked about their motivation to join the protests, Nicole said that the UK government hurts the children by having them vaccinated against COVID-19:

> Vaccines need to be stopped, the children should not be brought in this, and the government is a bunch of crooked bastards, I am sorry.

Nicole felt increasingly angry against the mandated vaccination, finding it "suspicious" and "worrying". Like Nicole, other protesters identified mainstream politicians with characteristics like "insensitive", "fascist", "authoritarian", "people with an agenda", "rigged", and "people without a soul". For Jasper (2014), anger not only motivates participation in social movements, but it also directs the blame for social problems. Our research participants blamed the politicians and vaccine mandate for the wider societal ills and inequalities that became more

---

[6] This conspiracy theory assumes that the global elite planned and managed the COVID-19 pandemic.

visible during the pandemic.

Protesters were also angry about the coverage of and content in mainstream media outlets, particularly BBC and expressed their concern about the media narrative on vaccine mandates. Pawel mentioned:

I have journalist friends and quite a few of them at the BBC say they cannot be on the pain of being sacked, they cannot say what they want to say, they hear massive stories every day like tribulation, vaccination injuries and they cannot. They are not allowed to put it out. It's an outrage! The press is the main stair of democracy, and that stair not chipped away, it is blown.

Pawel emphasised how journalists were hindered from expressing themselves freely by media companies, particularly the BBC. The perceived lack of coverage of protests in the mainstream media also spurred anger and frustration. Sam stated:

Ever since January 2020, the narrative has always been one sided in the media. They did not look at both sides of the story. BBC, Sky and others say only tens of thousands and there are clearly more people than that [in the protests]. They only show violent pictures which are induced by the police unfortunately. It makes everyone look violent here and we are not. This makes me really angry.

The feeling of anger originated because our participants felt that their power was reduced due to the media's coverage of the protests (Jasper, 2014). Our participants like Sam voiced their concerns about the media narrative on the protests and blamed journalists for being liars.

Other participants, such as Brian and Nikki, expressed disgust at legacy media, which, according to them, was 'covering up the truth', instead of broadcasting it. Brian recounted:

I think it is absolutely disgusting. Some of them covered the protests slightly before the huge protests in Hyde Park. Many thousands of people protested (in Hyde Park) and I read one story. No one else covered it for days and days afterwards. And the protests two weeks ago, I saw nothing on mainstream media about it at all. It is disgusting.

Similarly Georgina expressed:

And media is absolutely disgusting that it shuts down and cancels and incoherent with social media.

The "disgusting events" are often the ones that have invaded and saturated our lives (Ahmed, 2014). Our interviewees' mention of disgust indicates their view of legacy news as invasive and hazardous. As Ahmed (2014: 97) states, the word 'disgust' might often be transferred from the event to the bodies of those others who are held responsible for the event. Our participants, who viewed legacy news as a threat to their lives, regarded the legacy media with disgust. Deplatforming diverse voices related to pandemic and health restrictions on legacy social media platforms, whilst not being represented in the mainstream media created an intense protest atmosphere. This was also visible in the protest spaces with slogans, chants and banners delinating "media is the virus".

4.3. Anxiety towards the future

Within the anti-lockdown protest atmosphere, anxiety grew stronger and mobilised more people to join the movement. Anxiety can be described as the tense anticipation of a threatening but often vague event (Ahmed, 2004). The COVID-19 strategies adopted by the government and counteractive narratives on social media questioning these strategies led to an increasing sense of anxiety about the future. Our participants identified the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccine-based travel restrictions as violating their personal rights and freedoms. They also felt uncertain about future policies and directions of the government. Georgina recounted:

I am a woman with kids and I am terrified that the government is going to try to force me to make my kids get experimental inoculations in breach of the Nuremberg[7] code of 1947 and the council of Europe resolution 2361 that says you cannot do these things. It seems all the institutions of governance, all the rule of law and supreme court are all corrupted entirely and it is terrifying.

The idea that the vaccine mandate breached the Nuremberg code was frequently shared on social media platforms, amplifying user anxiety. Georgina's account of their fear of being forced into an experiment illustrates how this conspiracy theory intensified interviewees' anxiety, fueled by perceptions of top-down decisions and corrupt institutions.

Pawel was also worried about unforeseen negative consequences of the COVID-19 vaccine:

Now they are getting younger and younger people to take the vaccine … it is untested, we don't know what's going to happen with it. It will change your DNA, reduce your immunity. I follow the kind of real expert in immunology and vaccines that aren't getting their voices heard in the mainstream media. I think as an ex-journalist, that [mainstream media] is so biased, I stopped listening to the mainstream media.

Anxiety is considered as a "protracted state produced by a sustained expectation that the aversive event is likely to occur" (Daniel-Watanabe and Fletcher, 2022). Pawel's reflections on the uncertain future showcased a sustained anxiety, persisting over several months, which pushed protesters to act on their moral commitments and resist a corrupt system that long marginalised them.

Pawel and Georgina's statements are in line with conspiracy theories such as the Great Reset and Plandemic,[8] which spread on social media platforms first and then spilled over to the physical space of the protests. Collective emotions can bond conspiracy theories (Demuru, 2022). Emotions shared by anti-lockdown communities, such as distrust, disillusionment, anger and anxiety, were bolstered through misinformation, disinformation and information sources, which at times contributed to wider endorsement of conspiracy theories and an intense and anxious anti-lockdown affective atmosphere.

4.4. Joy sustained protest activity

Although protesters continued to express anger, disgust and anxiety in the later phases of the movement, this was balanced by more positive and solidaristic emotions, such as joy and hope (Goodwin et al., 2001: 53). Over time, we observed an overwhelming positive mood marked by joyful cheers and enthusiastic social interactions amongst protesters in parks, squares and on the streets of London, signalling feelings of better well-being and camaraderie. The joy of creating a perceived organic community and coalitions as part of the larger anti-lockdown atmosphere was a crucial motivation for our participants to come back to the protests. Atmospheres have dynamic qualities such as 'relaxing' or 'tense' that animate or dampen a space of experience (Anderson, 2009). The physical atmosphere of anti-lockdown protests was increasingly more relaxing and easygoing. This was particularly due to the easing of social and travel restrictions over time, such as reopening of shops, workplaces and pubs.

Feelings of togetherness and belonging also infused protest spaces with a relaxing protest atmosphere. Rob, for instance, was joyful to witness growing numbers with each new protest. Pointing to protesters around the Broadcasting House, Rob excitedly told us that the people there significantly outnumbered the elites. Rob expressed a sense of

---

[7] The Nuremberg Code is a set of ten principles outlining the ethical limits of medical experimentation involving human subjects.

[8] This conspiracy theory proposes that the COVID-19 pandemic was deliberately planned or fraudulent.

belonging to protest sites and communities and voiced hope that collective action could lead to meaningful social change. We also observed that walking together from Hyde Park or the Houses of Parliament to the Broadcasting House and chanting synchronously created an emotional echo-chamber, which allowed the shared emotions of protesters to echo back to them (Eslen-Ziya et al., 2019).

The protesters' longer-term identification with the protests also emanated from the joy of being part of an alternative community with "collective emotional energy" and collective distrust against mainstream health policy, elites and media (Tonkiss, 2021). Our youngest interviewee Sam recounted:

It is really nice [to be in the protest space], you meet new people that you share the same beliefs [with] and you feel united. Everyone shares the same beliefs and you feel really supported.

Similarly, Hannah said:

I am here [in the protests] because I know that there are people who are extremely keen about learning the truth here, at least questioning what is given to them. And this is a place where you get encouraged when you see other people's willingness to question things. A lot of the time, I see many truthful, honest doctors but they are just squashed and discredited.

The collective harmony of the group made Sam and Hannah feel joyful during the protests, and encouraged them to return to the protests. Sam's excitement in talking about other protesters also showed that the protests served as supportive spaces for the anti-lockdown communities, where they felt comfortable. For Hannah, engaging with doctors' posts on social media fostered a sense of community and civic value within anti-lockdown groups. Hannah's identification with other protesters through their mutual support for trusted doctors in online spaces mirrors previous research showing that social media engagement can lead to interpersonal trust (Kwon et al., 2021). Although conspiracy theories foster feelings of distrust and anxiety towards elites, as explained by Demuru (2022), collective conspiracy belief represents an affective experience through which protesters can build a sense of belonging. The banners displayed at the protests represented these beliefs, such as "No fascist state, we are sovereign and we are not afraid", reinforcing the "we"ness and the unity.

Rowan further expressed the appeal of the protests as being peaceful and loving:

What makes these protests appealing for me is that there is no violence. The protests are loving.

In the main entrance to Hyde Park near the Statue of Achilles where protesters were joining the protests, Rowan [looking around and smiling] added that despite the best efforts of the police and the media portraying the protests as violent, the protests had been joyful and non-violent. By differentiating themselves from other "violent" protests, the protesters not only created an external group within other movements but also imagined the components of their own community. We observed that when attempting to keep the protests peaceful and chanting in front of the Broadcasting House against BBC or experiencing police intervention on the streets, the joy of being and acting together through common slogans, chants and walking together enabled protesters to form a more relaxing—rather than tense—atmosphere.

Our participants also found joy in witnessing people from diverse social backgrounds unite in protest. Despite ideological differences, they experienced a shared sense of belonging and emotional connection, fostered by a collective disillusionment with mainstream politics and media narratives. The affective community in the anti-lockdown publics built earlier on social media platforms through common information sources were bolstered by the sense of togetherness in physical protest spaces, through common chants (e.g., freedom), linguistic signs (e.g., we are the 99 %), placards and flags (e.g., fake news, fake virus, fake vaccine, fake off), representing the shared values of the community.

Georgina recounted with excitement:

Here [the protests] it is really organic. Look at me, I am a conservative establishment person. There are hippies [here] [laughs], it is genuinely organic.

For Georgina, the protest space transformed into a "utopian-pluralist state" (Eslen-Ziya et al., 2019), serving as a source of joy. Believing it to be an organic "people's protest", participants experienced the joy of equality. These protest spaces offered a sense of equal power among individuals, a horizontal dynamic absent in their interactions with societal elites.

Despite their anxiety about the future, we observed participants finding hope in the belief that collective protest could empower the people to counter political elites. This hope turned into joy as they witnessed the growth of anti-lockdown protests — from small local gatherings to large-scale marches. This indicated for anti-lockdown communities that more people were 'waking up'. Powerful emotions of solidarity manifested themselves within the dynamic character of anti-lockdown activism and sustained the movement for about two years. However, rather than dealing with broader and underlying societal problems and inequalities, small park meetings and larger protests aimed to challenge pandemic and top-down health policy at the time. As such, the social movement ended with the dissolution of the pandemic measures.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper contributes to studies on social movements in crisis and/or emergency periods by examining the underlying emotions within the broader affective protest atmosphere, leading to and sustaining anti-lockdown protests in the UK. Our findings show that the anti-lockdown protesters' long-run emotions of distrust and disillusionment towards political parties and mainstream media institutions were the main formative reasons that affected their meaning-making, practices and actions and helped galvanise anti-lockdown protests. Asahina's (2019) research shows that short-run emotions can serve as a bridge to long-run emotions through protesters' commitment to activism. Our study, differently, shows that long-run emotions, such as distrust and disillusionment, are also important to foster the emergence of short-run emotions of anger and disgust at the outset of a protest. Anti-lockdown communities, who already distrusted mainstream politics and media, considered pandemic restrictions as emotionally overwhelming and inconsistent, which triggered the negative emotions of anger and disgust towards elites and mobilised the protesters.

Our research also showed that emotions like anxiety were intensified during the protests as the protesters lacked trust in government's social and health policies, such as vaccine mandates. The introduction of the COVID-19 vaccines and their negative consequences led protesters to feel that they were losing control over their and their children's bodies, which created significant anxiety. Anxious psychological states and stress may lead to the endorsement of conspiratorial ideas (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013). Accordingly, our participants frequently referenced conspiracy theories about COVID-19, further escalating uncertainty and anxiety (Della Porta, 2024). Our findings indicate that today's media landscape, characterised by an overload of facts, rumours and speculations, might mediate feelings of suspicion and anxiety, which could mobilise and sustain social movements.

Despite their diverse political backgrounds and views, all our participants also perceived the mainstream media akin to the elites that they distrusted. Consequently, our participants recounted that they either completely avoided news from these sources or engaged with them critically. Disgust was also articulated towards the mainstream media for not acknowledging the alternative narratives and movements against pandemic policies and vaccines. Media can foster inclusion and solidarity through mediated emotional connections, but they can also initiate conflict and exclusion (Ihlebaek and Holter, 2021). For our

participants, mainstream media became a space for exclusion during the pandemic, as they felt that their movement and concerns were not covered accurately by the mainstream media and that they perceived themselves to be deplatformed on legacy social media platforms.

Our paper also contributes to scholarship on emotions, media and social movements by showing that distrust in mainstream media led protesters to place greater trust in alternative news that challenge mainstream media narrative. Although protesters distrusted mainstream media, they trusted "touching content" produced by perceived like-minded doctors circulated in online spaces. Relatable news stories are known to emotionally engage audiences more, making them more inclined to take action (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). We argue that such content led to the formation of new conspiracy coalitions (Bertuzzi, 2021). These coalitions fed the affective anti-lockdown protest atmosphere that has capitalised on the already existing emotions of distrust and disillusionment towards information sources and scientific evidence. While provoking anxiety about political outcomes and disgust for elites, our findings also point out that conspiracy theories have awakened positive emotions, such as the sense of togetherness and belonging. This is because engaging with conspiracy theories can fulfill social motives such as fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance, which may also signal individuals' adherence to a particular group (Mercier, 2020; Williams, 2022). In the context of anti-lockdown protests, embracing conspiracy narratives may have strengthened communal bonds and collective efficacy, amplifying feelings of joy and hope amongst participants.

Hence, although individuals are often motivated to act through negative emotions (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), our ethnographic observations in six different protests showed that both negative and positive emotions underpinned the affective anti-lockdown protest atmosphere in London. Protesters were angry and anxious, but the overall relaxing affective atmosphere of anti-lockdown protests gauged the relative joyfulness as a positive reinforcer, building trust in the hope that protests can affect the political will and stop the lockdowns. Joy as collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1995) was particularly intensified with the growing number of protesters marching and chanting in spaces connected to political and media elites in London, such as the Palace of Westminster or BBC Broadcasting House. Our participants expressed feeling connected to other protesters and formed affective bonding to them in physical protest spaces, based on their already existing sense of disillusionment with mainstream politics and mainstream strands of information and news. Despite expressing individualistic values and a negative sense of freedom during the protests (Ozduzen et al., 2024), the feelings of togetherness, bonding and joy intensified with the chants and slogans in the protest spaces and remained crucial in sustaining the movement. Hence, our findings support Yang's (2000) argument that negative emotions typically arise in relation to opponents, whereas emotions emerging from interaction among protesters tend to be more positive. In the anti-lockdown protests, negative emotions of distrust, anger and disgust in relation to political and media elites were balanced by positive and collective emotions, such as joy and solidarity in an evolving protest atmosphere.

Our findings share commonalities with other social movements such as 1989 Chinese student movement (Yang, 2000), Arab uprisings (Aslan Ozgul, 2020), Gezi protests in Turkey (Eslen-Ziya et al., 2019), Black Lives Matter movements (Ellefsen, 2022), where scholars observed a combination of negative and positive emotions that sustained these movements. However, little systematic research has been devoted to understanding how the specific feelings of "distrust" towards political and media elites, and "trust" in alternative sources and conspiracy theories might influence mobilisation and sustainment of these movements. Moreover, while the anti-lockdown movement shares common emotions, such as anger and distrust toward elites, with other social movements, especially populist movements, our study provides a more nuanced take on the range of emotions that motivate collective reaction to political elites. Further studies can conduct additional research with the anti-lockdown communities to explore whether and how the community evolved after the protests and the roles affect and emotions played in this process.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Billur Aslan Ozgul: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Ozge Ozduzen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Investigation. **Bogdan Ianosev:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Investigation.

References

Anderson, B., 2009. Affective atmospheres. Emot. Space. Soc. 2 (2), 77–81.
Andersen, K., Shehata, A., Andersson, D., 2021. Alternative news orientation and trust in mainstream media: a longitudinal audience perspective. Digit. Journal. 11 (5), 833–852.
Ahmed, S., 2004. Affective economies. Soc. Text 22 (2), 117–139.
Ahmed, S., 2014. Cultural Politics of Emotion. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
Allen, N., Birch, S., 2015. Process preferences and British public opinion: citizens' judgements about government in an era of anti-politics. Polit. Stud. 63 (2), 390–411.
Asahina, Y., 2019. Becoming right-wing citizens in contemporary Japan. Contemp. Jpn. 31 (2), 122–140.
Aslan Ozgul, B., 2020. Leading protests in the digital age: Youth activism in Egypt and Syria. Palgrave Macmillan (Studies in Young People and Politics). Basingstoke.
Aslan Ozgul, B., Veneti, A., 2021. The different organisational structures of alternative media: through the perspective of alternative media journalists in Turkey and Greece. Digit. Journal. 10 (8), 1302–1321.
Bensimon, M., 2012. The sociological role of collective singing during intense moments of protest: the disengagement from the gaza strip. Sociology 46 (2), 241–257.
Bericat, E., 2016. The sociology of emotions: four decades of progress. Curr. Sociol. 64 (3), 491–513.
Bertuzzi, N., 2021. Conspiracy theories and social movements studies: a research agenda. Sociol. Compass 15 (12), 1–16.
Boulianne, S., Hoffmann, C.P., Bossetta, M., 2024. Social media platforms for politics: a comparison of Facebook, instagram, twitter, YouTube, reddit, snapchat, and WhatsApp. New Media Soc. 0 (0).
Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qual. Res. Psychol. 3 (2), 77–101.
Brotherton, R., Eser, S., 2014. Bored to fears: boredom proneness, paranoia, and conspiracy theories. Pers. Indiv. Differ. 80, 1–5, 2015.
Brown, G., Pickerill, J., 2009. Space for emotion in the spaces of activism. Emot. space soc. 2 (1), 24–35.
Burkitt, I., 2017. Decentring emotion regulation: from emotion regulation to relational emotion. Emot. Rev. 10 (2), 167–173.
Cass, N., Walker, G., 2009. Emotion and rationality: the characterisation and evaluation of opposition to renewable energy projects. Emot. Space. Soc. 2 (1), 62–69.
Cayli, B., 2017. Victims and protest in a social space: revisiting the sociology of emotions. Emot. space soc. 22, 61–70.
Cushion, S., 2023. Beyond Mainstream Media: Alternative Media and the Future of Journalism. Routledge, London.
Daniel-Watanabe, L., Fletcher, P.C., 2022. Are fear and anxiety truly distinct? Bio. Psychiatr. Nat. Glob. Open Sci. 2 (4), 341–349.
Della Porta, D., 2024. Regressive Movements in Times of Emergency: the Protests against Anti-contagion Measures and Vaccination during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Demuru, P., 2022. Qanons, anti-vaxxers, and alternative health influencers: a cultural semiotic perspective on the links between conspiracy theories, spirituality, and wellness during the Covid-19 pandemic. Soc. Semiot. 32 (5), 588–605.

Doroshenko, L., Tu, F., 2022. Like, share, comment, and repeat: far-right messages, emotions, and amplification in social media. J. Inf. Technol. Polit. 20 (3), 286–302.

Douglas, K.M., Sutton, R.M., Cichocka, A., 2017. The psychology of conspiracy theories. Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci. 26 (6), 538–542.

Durkheim, É., 1995. The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. The Free Press, New York.

Ellefsen, R., Sandberg, S., 2022. Black lives matter: the role of emotions in political engagement. Sociology 56 (6), 1103–1120.

Eslen-Ziya, H., McGarry, A., Jensen, O., Erhart, I., Korkut, U., 2019. 'From anger to solidarity: the emotional echo-chamber of Gezi Park protests'. Emot. Space. Soc. 33, 100632.

Fine, G.A., 2018. Now and again: eventful experience as a resource in senior activism. Soc. Mov. Stud. 19 (5–6), 576–591.

Fitouchi, L., André, J.B., Baumard, N., 2022. Are there really so many moral emotions? Carving morality at its functional joints. The Oxford Handbook of Evolution and the Emotions. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Flinders, M., 2018. The (anti-) politics of Brexit. In: Diamond, P., Nedergaard, P., Rosamond, B. (Eds.), The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of Brexit. Routledge, London, pp. 179–193.

Gadarian, S.K., Albertson, B., 2014. Anxiety, immigration, and the search for information. Polit. Psychol. 35 (2), 133–164.

Gerbaudo, P., 2020. The pandemic crowd. J. Int. Aff. 73 (2), 61–76.

Goodwin, J., Jasper, J.M., Polletta, F., 2001. Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Goodwin, J., Jasper, J.M., 2006. Emotions and social movements. In: Stets, J.E., Turner, J.H. (Eds.), Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions. *Handbooks Of Sociology And Social Research*. Springer, Boston.

Grande, E., Saldivia Gonzatti, D., 2025. A revolt of the distrustful? Political trust, political protest and the democratic deficit. J. Eur. Publ. Pol. 1–29.

Grzesiak-Feldman, M., 2013. The effect of high-anxiety situations on conspiracy thinking. Current Psychology. J. Diverse Perspect. Diverse Psychol. Issues 32 (1), 100–118.

Hameleers, M., Brosius, A., de Vreese, C.H., 2022. Whom to trust? Media exposure patterns of citizens with perceptions of misinformation and disinformation related to the news media. Eur. J. Commun. 37 (3), 237–268.

Hoffer, E., 1951. The True Believer. Harper and Row, New York.

Holmes, M., 2010. The emotionalization of reflexivity. Sociology 44 (1), 139–154.

Ianosev, B., Ozduzen, O., Aslan Ozgul, B., 2025. 'They don't care about you, me, or anyone else': populist storytelling in anti-lockdown protests. Eur. Politics Soc. 1–17.

Ibbetson, C., 2019. Do people in the UK trust the media? YouGov. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/16/do-britons-trust-press. (Accessed 9 November 2024).

Ihlebaek, K.A., Holter, C.R., 2021. Hostile emotions: an exploratory study of far-right online commenters and their emotional connection to traditional and alternative news media. Journalism 22 (5), 1207–1222.

Jasper, J.M., 1998. The emotions of protest: affective and reactive emotions in and around social movements. Sociol. Forum 13, 397–424.

Jasper, J.M., 2011. Emotions and social movements: twenty years of theory and research. Annu. Rev. Sociol. 37 (1), 285–303.

Jasper, J.M., 2014. Constructing indignation: anger dynamics in protest movements. Emot. Rev. 6 (3), 208–213.

Jasper, J.M., Young, M., Zuern, E., 2018. Character work in social movements. Theor. Soc. 47 (1), 113–131.

Jessop, B., 2015. Margaret thatcher and thatcherism: dead but not buried. Br. Polit. 10, 16–30.

Kinnvall, C., Svensson, T., 2022. Exploring the populist 'mind': anxiety, fantasy, and everyday populism. Br. J. Polit. Int. Relat. 24 (3), 526–542.

Kowalewski, M., 2020. Street protests in times of COVID-19: adjusting tactics and marching 'as usual. Soc. Mov. Stud. 20 (6), 758–765.

Kwon, K.H., Shao, C., Nah, S., 2021. Localized social media and civic life: motivations, trust, and civic participation in local community contexts. J. Inf. Technol. Polit. 18 (1), 55–69.

Leinius, J., 2022. Cosmopolitical Solidarity. Springer International Publishing, Cham.

Lombard, L., 2022. The interpretation of relationships: fieldwork as boundary-negotiation. Ethnography (Lond.), 14661381211069670.

Lünenborg, M., 2019. Affective publics. In: Slaby, J., von Scheve, C. (Eds.), Affective Societies. Routledge, London, pp. 319–329.

Mercier, H., 2020. Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe. Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

Olivas Osuna, Kiefel, M., Katsouyanni, K.G., 2021. Place matters: Analysing the roots of political distrust and Brexit narratives at a local level. Governance 34 (4), 1019–1038.

Østbø, J., 2016. Demonstrations against demonstrations: the dispiriting emotions of the Kremlin's social media 'mobilization'. Soc. Mov. Stud. 16 (3), 283–296.

Ozduzen, O., Aslan Ozgul, B., Ianosev, B., 2024. 'Institutions of governance are all corrupted': anti-political collective identity of anti-lockdown protesters in digital and physical spaces. Soc. Mov. Stud. 23 (6), 676–694.

Paasonen, S., 2021. Dependent, Distracted, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media. MIT Press, Massachusetts.

Petrini, E., Wettergren, Å., 2022. Organising outsourced workers in UK's new trade unionism-emotions, protest, and collective identity. Soc. Mov. Stud. 22 (4), 513–529.

Pink, S., 2015. Doing Sensory Ethnography. SAGE, London.

Proudfoot, K., 2023. Inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis in mixed methods research. J. Mix. Methods Res. 17 (3), 308–326.

Ransan-Cooper, H., Ercan, S.A., Duus, S., 2018. When anger meets joy: how emotions mobilise and sustain the anti-coal seam gas movement in regional Australia. Soc. Mov. Stud. 17 (6), 635–657.

Rosanvallon, P., Goldhammer, A., 2008. Counter-democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Serrano-Puche, J., 2015. Emotions and digital technologies: mapping the field of research in media studies. LSE Work. Pap. Series. https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/working-paper-series/EWP33.pdf. (Accessed 9 November 2024).

Solomon, T., 2023. Up in the air: ritualized atmospheres and the global Black Lives Matter movement. Eur. J. Int. Relat. 29 (3), 576–601.

Somma, N.M., 2021. Power cages and the October 2019 uprising in Chile. Soc. Ident. 27 (5), 579–592.

Steinbeck, S., Munar, A.M., 2024. Affective atmospheres in children's museum experiences. Leis. Stud. 43 (3), 378–394.

Tonkiss, K., 2021. 'A baby is a baby': the Asha protests and the sociology of affective post-nationalism. Sociology 55 (1), 146–162.

Tyler, K., Banducci, S., Degnen, C., 2025. Reflections on Polarisation and Inequalities in Brexit Pandemic Times: Fractured Lives in Britain. Routledge, London.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K., 2018. Media coverage of shifting emotional regimes: donald Trump's angry populism. Media Cult. Soc. 40 (5), 766–778.

Wall, I.R., 2019. Policing atmospheres: crowds, protest and 'atmotechnics'. Theor. Cult. Soc. 36 (4), 143–162.

Williams, D., 2022. Signalling, commitment, and strategic absurdities. Mind & Language 37 (5), 1011–1029.

Yang, G., 2000. Achieving emotions in collective action: emotional processes and movement mobilization in the 1989 Chinese student movement. Sociol. Q. 41 (4), 593–614.

Zinn, J.O., 2021. Introduction: towards a sociology of pandemics. Curr. Sociol. 69 (4), 435–452.

Further reading

Aslan Ozgul, B., Mcavoy, E., OLoughlin, B., Gillespie, M., 2021. Shakespeare Lives on social media: Cultural diplomacy in the digital age. Int. J. Cult. Pol. (4), 1–17.