

“Sad Day for Ireland”: The Construction and Positioning of Irish National Identity in Social Media Discourse during the Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment and Introduce Abortion Legislation

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Abstract

This study investigates the construction and positioning of Irish national identity in social media discourse during the 2018 referendum campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment and introduce abortion legislation. The referendum marked a pivotal moment in the Republic of Ireland's history, reflecting a shift in public perception and national identity. Historically, Irish identity was closely tied to Catholicism, with abortion debates often centring on a collective national identity rather than individual rights. This study employs a corpus-based qualitative examination of Facebook comments on articles from major Irish news outlets, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how national identity was represented, contested, and repositioned. The analysis identifies four main groups: Yes supporters, No supporters, undecided or neutral voters, and others. The findings reveal two conflicting visions of Ireland: one that is future-forward and embraces modernity, and another that clings to traditional values and laments a perceived loss of morality. The study highlights the role of language in enacting social change and the ongoing struggle over national identity in Ireland, particularly in the context of gender and social inequality. The results underscore the complex interplay between national identity, religion, and political discourse in shaping public opinion and policy.

Keywords: national identity, abortion discourse, social media, computer-mediated discourse, Ireland.

Introduction

This study examines social media responses to online newspaper coverage in the Republic of Ireland of the 2018 referendum campaign to remove Article 40.3.3, known as the Eighth Amendment, from the Constitution of Ireland. This amendment equated the life of the pregnant person with that of the embryo or foetus, making abortion nearly impossible except in extreme cases. As the Republic of Ireland requires a referendum to amend its Constitution, this brought the issue of abortion into the public sphere. Abortion is considered a "morality policy" (Knill et al, 2015), meaning that it is more often linked to moral values rather than technical policy issues. Morality policies attract high levels of public participation. In the 20 months prior, media coverage was extensive, marking a pivotal moment in Ireland's history and self-determination of its national identity.

Historically, Irish identity was often closely tied to Roman Catholicism. In the late 1970s, fearing the spread of abortion access, influential figures, including priests and politicians, campaigned to define abortion as a “threat to the nation’s character” (Smyth, 2005, p.55). This moral panic led to the establishment of pro-life groups who successfully campaigned for the addition of the Eighth Amendment to the constitution in 1983 (Referendum Results 1937 - 2015, 2016). During that referendum 67% of the population voted in favour. This outcome appeared to solidify Ireland's anti-abortion stance and the Catholic Church's dominance in society. Over the next three decades public perception slowly shifted. This shift was highlighted by the public response to incidents including the 1992 X Case and the 2012 death of Savita Halappanavar (after which it was remarked that “cultural politics of abortion in Ireland seemed to change overnight” (McDonnell & Murphy, 2018, p. 16)). It became increasingly clear that the Eighth Amendment was no longer fit for purpose. In January 2018, a referendum was announced, asking voters if they approved of removing the Eighth Amendment and allowing the regulation of abortion through legislation.

The ensuing social media discourse reflects a long struggle over national identity in the Republic of Ireland. Smyth (1998) noted that the 1992 X Case debate in the Irish press focused on the meaning of 'Irishness.' Catholicism was seen as a core value, equating being Catholic with being pro-life. During the 1983 referendum, the pro-life campaign linked abortion with national identity, portraying feminism and liberalism as threats to Irish values. In the online discourse of this study both the Yes and No users identify as Irish; however shared nationality did not equate to shared values. Both sides appealed to a collective Irish conscience and past, highlighting the contested nature of national identity. The abortion referendum campaign demonstrates how language enacts social change and can both resist and reinforce gender and social inequality through patriarchal discourses. This study explores how national identity was represented, contested and repositioned using computer-mediated discourse analysis. This study seeks to address two research questions:

1. What groups are represented in social media discourse about abortion in Ireland?
2. How is Irish national identity constructed and positioned by lay users in social media discourse about abortion?

Literature Review: Constructing Identity Online and Changing Irish Identities

As this study investigates the construction of identities online, it is worth examining the impact of computer-mediated discourse (CMD) on identity formation, followed by an overview of historical Irish identities through the lens of abortion discourse.

Online Identity in Computer-Mediated Discourse

CMD is situated at the interface between writing and speech, meaning that users produce language online that is similar to writing (i.e., typing) but their language also shares many features with oral language (Crystal, 2001). CMD can be characterised by rude and aggressive language, often attributed to the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). Early studies viewed online identity as less authentic than offline identity; however, more recent research highlights its complexity and interconnection with real-world identity (Bolander, 2016). Social media enables users to “type oneself into being” (Sunden, 2003), allowing for identity play and anonymity (Danet et al., 2006). While these platforms offer freedom of expression, they can also reproduce offline inequalities, particularly around race and gender (Bailey, 1996; Daniels, 2012).

National Identity

Anderson (1991) defines nations as "imagined political communities", shaped by shared narratives and reinforced through media. Constructing national identities involves building the national identity while distancing the other (De Cillia et al., 1999). Political events including elections and referendums, often act as flashpoints for identity renegotiation (De Cillia et al., 1999). In Ireland, national identity has historically been defined in opposition to Britain. Nation builders like Hyde and de Valera emphasised racial and cultural distinctiveness, with Roman Catholicism positioned as a core value (Kornprobst, 2005; Dillon, 1996). British policy aimed to create a loyal colony, but Irish nationalists resisted by embracing Catholicism, making it a pillar of national identity and resistance (White, 2010). Following independence, the 1937 Irish Constitution gave the Catholic Church a ‘special role’, with influence over health and education. Policies emphasised women's roles in the home, and those who did not meet moral standards were confined to institutions like Magdalene laundries where they could no longer damage the national image

(Fischer, 2016). As Ireland modernised and secularised, especially during the Celtic Tiger economic boom, the Church's influence waned due to a number of abuse scandals and the growing influence of globalisation. Despite becoming more secular, Catholicism's legacy persists in the Irish psyche. The term "Catholic guilt" reflects this, as seen after the 2008 economic collapse when Ireland reverted to modesty and self-regulation (Free & Scully, 2018). This culture of shame extends to women experiencing abortion migration (Fischer, 2019).

Abortion as a Lens on Irish Identity

Abortion discourse in Ireland has long reflected tensions around national identity. Historically, abortion was framed as foreign and un-Irish, often associated with British values (Smyth, 1998; Muldowney, 2013). Campaign slogans and media narratives reinforced this binary, portraying Ireland as morally superior and protective of children (Ferriter, 2010; Statham & Ringrow, 2022). However, this identity was conflicted, what some saw as benevolence others saw as oppression. It is estimated that more 170,000 pregnant people have travelled from Ireland to Britain for abortion services. To nationalists the idea that Irish women would be 'forced' to go to Britain for services the Irish state denied them was a source of national shame (O'Donovan & Siller, 2021). Thus, the issue of abortion offers a unique lens for examining Irish national identity. Ireland's abortion debate coincided with events signifying a more liberal and globalised nation, such as joining the EEC, electing a female president, decriminalizing homosexuality, and increased internal migration. These changes created internal identity conflicts, with some embracing modernity and others fearing a loss of Irishness (Oaks, 2002). However, more recent media coverage has positioned abortion as a legislative issue. McDonnell & Murphy (2018) found that media coverage of Savita Halappanavar's¹ death indicated a shift away from Catholicism as the sole source of moral truth. Her death challenged the myth of Ireland as the safest country for mothers and babies and positioned the Catholic Church's role in the healthcare service as a hinderance.

The referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment raised many questions about identity for voters, in particular questions about national identity were to the

¹ Savita Halappanavar was a dentist of Indian origin living in Ireland. She died in 2012 from sepsis while experiencing a miscarriage. She was denied treatment to expedite the miscarriage as a foetal heartbeat was detected.

fore of the media coverage (see Bacik, 2018; Calnan, 2018; Williams, 2018). There was a sense among the electorate that this was a pivotal moment in Ireland's history. Analysis of discursive strategies used throughout the 2018 referendum found that legalisation of abortion was positioned as a threat to the nation's character by the No campaign (O'Donovan & Siller, 2021). Victory for the Yes campaign signified that the historical national identity which had relied on the incarceration and exclusion of so-called 'fallen women' from Irish society had shifted, and instead "the dominant version of Irish national identity is compatible with a concern for gender equality" (Strange, 2022, p. 235).

Methodology

This study uses corpus-based qualitative examination of linguistic patterns and individual comments through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach highlights the extent to which discourse reproduces, resists, and or reinforces power structures (Titscher, et al., 2000).

Data Collection

Data were collected from Facebook comments on articles about abortion in the Republic of Ireland. These articles included reports on the progress of the referendum, polling numbers, think pieces, and personal stories. All comments were collected from the public pages of five major Irish news outlets: The Irish Times, Irish Independent, TheJournal.ie, The Irish Sun, and Irish Mirror posted from July 2016 to September 2019. July 2016 marked the establishment of the Citizens' Assembly on abortion, a key moment in the campaign. Relevant articles were identified using Boolean search strings on the Facebook pages of the news outlets. Twelve relevant articles were identified across five platforms, and all comments were copied into an Excel spreadsheet. Comments were collected from public Facebook pages, and identifying features were anonymized. Initially, 2865 comments were collected, 167 comments that only tagged other users were removed, leaving 2698 comments for analysis. Note that the corpus may include multiple comments from the same users. The total word count is 68,022 words.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, comments were classified and quantified to identify the user groups present in the data based on their referendum position. In the second stage, CDA was applied to examine how language constructs and challenges power structures, highlighting its role in social change and in reshaping Irish national identity through the lens of abortion discourse. After cleaning the data, each comment was read twice and analysed line by line.

Comments were initially coded according to their stance on the abortion referendum based on the discourse of the official campaign strategies of the Yes and No groups. Four main groups were identified: Yes supporters, No supporters, Undecided or neutral voters, and Other. This categorization was informed by Kushin & Kitchener's (2009) study, which identified Support, Opposition, and Neutral users. The category of Other was added for comments which fell outside of this scope. An overview of these categories is presented in Table 1.


Table 1

Categorisation of Comments According to Stance

Category	Definition
Yes (Support)	Individuals who explicitly express their support for the Yes side of the Referendum campaign. They could also be referred to as 'Pro-Choice' supporters in the traditional discourse that surrounds abortion. They express support although not necessarily approval (from a moral judgement standpoint) of a pregnant person's right to choose whether to terminate the pregnancy.
No (Opposition)	Individuals who explicitly express their support for the No side of the Referendum campaign. They could also be referred to as 'Pro-Life' supporters in the traditional discourse that surrounds abortion. The members of this group do not support abortion in the circumstances allowed for in the proposed legislation.
Undecided (Neutral)	Individuals who have not yet decided on their position in the Referendum. They can see merits and flaws to the cases being forwarded by both sides but have not declared a position.

Other	Individuals who left comments that diverged from the abortion topic. They have either used the topic as a gateway to a tangential issue, or they are trolls launching personal attacks on other users.
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Once each comment had been assigned to a group, it was given a numerical value of 1, the frequency was then calculated as a percentage of the total number of comments in the corpus. This was done in order to identify the overall representation of Yes/No/Undecided within the corpus. The comments then underwent a CDA analysis to determine how national identity was enacted by each of the groups. Macro analysis of the corpus was used to uncover the positioning of Irishness within the data. This was followed by micro analysis of users' discourse at group and individual levels. The framework is drawn from the study by Wodak et al. (2009) on the discursive construction of national identities. The focus of this framework is the presence of lexical units which construct notions of unification, sameness, difference, uniqueness, origin, and continuity. National identity coded comments included specific national terms, personal pronouns, online paralinguistic cues, adverbs of place, spatial references, and lexical units which referenced uniqueness and difference. Examples of the keywords and key terms used to identify identity themes:

Our; Irish; Ireland; English; England; Britain; here; this country; Yanks; we; at home; Northern Ireland; NI; the North; UK; , we are not the brits

It is important to note that out of context some of these keywords and terms do not carry sufficient semantic weight to signify identity. However, in critical discourse analysis semantic prosody explains how the meaning of words can be changed by their co-occurrences (Cheng, 2012). In this study seemingly neutral words (e.g. 'North') are given additional associations through frequent occurrences with certain collocates and help us to identify the identity theme the lexical item is bound to in this particular context.

Findings

Groups Represented in the Data

Table 2 shows the total number of occurrences of comments aligning with the four identified groups and their corresponding frequency in the data. It is important to note that the data are displayed in their original form.

Table 2

Overall Breakdown of Comments

Position on referendum	%	N
Yes	39%	1062
No	21%	559
Undecided	3%	87
Other	37%	990

The largest group identified in the data is composed of users who self-identify both explicitly and implicitly as Yes voters. An explicit identification makes the user's position immediately clear to others in the debate. For example:

I will be voting Yes 😊 (#184)

Implicit identifications are more subtle. Users may refer to underpinning beliefs that align them to the Yes campaign. Examples include:

Support woman to decide what to do with their own bodies..... CHOICE!!!. (#229)

Comments made by Yes users comprised 39% of the overall corpus. This was closely followed by users in the Other group who left off-topic comments or engaged in personal debates and arguments with other users; they comprised 37% of the overall corpus. Many of these comments include characteristics of flaming and trolling. 21% of comments were made by users explicitly or implicitly identifying as No campaign supporters. Similar to the Yes group, explicit identification of No

supporters included use of official campaign hashtags such as #VoteNo and #LoveBoth as well as declarations of position on the issue.

Abortion is murder ,Vote NO (#1802)

You are in denial, I get that, but since babies begin at conception, abortion is the act of killing. (#872)

Implicit identification comments in the data often included references to moral codes, for example:

A sad 😞 day for Ireland No one has a right to murder their child 😊 . Everyone had a right to be born. (#922)

Undecided voters were the least likely to engage in online discourse about the issue, representing just 3% of the overall corpus. Undecided voters were identified as comments that are on-topic and hence not part of the Other category, but do not declare a position on the issue.

I know that's why it's hard to say what is best for the country as a whole. (#2616)

It's never black and white, so you can't say ITS ALL BAD or ITS ALL GOOD (#2392)

Group Positioning

It is clear that when it comes to intergroup identity tension between the Yes and No users, the conflict and source of their fundamental differences are centred around rights and duties. For the Yes group national identity focuses on the duty to protect and defend women and girls and to ensure that they can access their rights in Ireland, as seen in the comment below:

A woman has the right to do what she wants with her own body. Its voted in so get over it. (#1166)

On the other side of the coin is the No group who see their duty as being to the unborn child who must be protected at all costs, including at the expense of the wellbeing and even life of the mother.

yes a woman has but what choice has the little baby ??? Would you like to be Murdered ??? (#1167)

Like in the example above, the No group position the unborn baby as defenceless, therefore, it is their duty to intervene on behalf of those they view as voiceless.

Emphasis on difference from Britain was key in the wake of the struggle for independence. In Facebook discourse, No users view a Yes vote as aligning with British values, which they find unacceptable. They position British identity as pro-abortion-for-profit industrialists preying on vulnerable Irish women. This continued emphasis on difference from Britain and othering of Britain is a key feature of No language. Introducing legal abortion in Ireland is seen as damaging national identity by likening Ireland to Britain. The Yes group believes reducing reliance on Britain will strengthen Irish national identity. Following Gibbons' (1996) model, they argue that post-independence, Ireland must break its last ties to Britain. They see it as shameful that Irish women have had to travel to Britain for healthcare they can't legally receive at home. The Yes group views a Yes vote as a step towards greater independence from Britain.

Thank God for England and Belfast where i was born and brought up for stopping the many hundreds of thousands of Catholic women from the land of the ignorant, Southern Ireland over the years from taking their own lives... (#2241)

Furthermore, a key feature of Ireland as a nation traditionally has been the powerful influence exerted by the Catholic Church culturally, socially, and politically. Opposition to abortion is a key teaching of the Catholic Church and the No group has retained this. While previous studies of the newspaper coverage of abortion in Ireland in the 21st century (McDonnell & Murphy, 2018) found that religious arguments against abortion have been side-lined in modern pro-life media discourse, in CMD vestiges of religion still remain. Although many of the linguistic strategies used to construct religious identity online (Bobkowski & Pearce, 2011) including explicit expression of religious identity and mentions of religious figures are absent in the language of the No group, the No group's moral code nevertheless closely aligns with that of Christianity.

The country of Ireland has lost its religious and moral value when it comes to the beginning of life Its very sad (#564)

The No group acknowledges the Catholic Church's failures in institutional abuse but, nevertheless, argues that this is not sufficient reason to expel the Church from the national sphere. They believe that increasing secularization and the loss of the Church as a moral guide harm Irish society. Despite being led by a local Catholic think tank and receiving significant donations from US Christian groups, the official No campaign avoided religious arguments. Instead, No users focus on medical, legal, and universal moral codes to oppose abortion, although their discourse is informed by Christianity.

Conversely, Yes users call for the removal of the Catholic Church from the public sphere. They highlight the discovery of a mass grave at the former mother and baby home in Tuam, Co. Galway, and other institutional abuses to portray Catholicism as a deviant influence on national identity. The Yes group argues that the Church lost its moral authority due to these abuses and is unfit to dictate right and wrong, especially regarding women's treatment.

I think that child sex abuse by priests and a graveyard of babies in Tuam and all hidden by the Catholic Church is very sad ... is that is religion and moral ? This is about choice for the individual female and not for a religion (#600)

While the data depict two ideologically opposed groups, both Yes and No users share certain discursive features. Language used by both groups had connotations of shame, with a sense among voters on both sides that they were trying to make amends for past failures. This idea of Ireland paying penance is a very Catholic concept which aligns with Free & Scully's (2018) hypothesis that after the Celtic Tiger's collapse, Ireland returned to learned habits of shame and punishment synonymous with Catholicism. The hedonism and materialism of the Celtic Tiger were incompatible with Catholic ideals of saintly poverty. To the No group, the hubris of the Celtic Tiger created a slippery slope, devolving into the false equivalency of abortion to progress.

The Celtic Tiger...property boom and crash, fat cats, bankers, greed, corruption, cocaine, cartels, immortality, abortion...progress?? (#974)

On the other side of the debate, the Yes group advocates for change as a means for making amends to the women who suffered under the old regime.

Well done IRELAND for finally doing right by the women of IRELAND. (#276)

In comments left after the outcome of the referendum had been announced, No users lament their failing the unborn and express remorse and shame on behalf of their version of the nation.

Very very sad day for Ireland. So many babies will be killed, all in the name of choice ❤️ (#409)

Among the Yes users in this study there is a real sense that they had a once-in-a-generation opportunity to achieve their group goals. In the comments made after the announcement of the outcome of the referendum vote, the overall theme of the language used is one of relief and gratitude. Relief that their long-fought battle is over, and gratitude to the people of Ireland who turned out in their droves to vote Yes, they have atoned for their previous sin of failing to protect the women of the past by changing the Ireland of the future.

National Identity: Two Visions of Ireland?

In terms of the CDA analysis, only data relating to the Yes and No categories are explored. Overall, in the data we can see two conflicting visions of Ireland. One that is future-forward and sees the removal of the Eighth Amendment as a step towards a brighter and fairer Ireland for all. On the other hand, we can also identify a vision of Ireland that harkens for traditional values and laments a supposed loss of morality that is embodied by the Repeal movement. In the example below, we can see these two conflicting visions of Ireland in a series of comments posted by users in response to an article announcing the outcome of the referendum vote, confirming the repeal of the Eighth Amendment.

The day Ireland removed human rights from the most innocent Irish. (#519)

A Very sad day for Ireland.. (#507)

Ireland descends into depravity... (#507)

Don't be sad.Irish women now can choose to have a safe, legal medical abortion in their own country.. (#554)

Great step towards the future ❤️ (#560)

In the examples above we can see that both sides attach enormous significance to the day in question; for both Yes and No users this is an historic occasion that marks a definitive shift in Irish society. No users make repeated use of the phrase “very sad day”. Their language is emotionally charged as evidenced by terms like “depravity” and “most innocent”. In contrast to this, the tone of the Yes users is one of joy and celebration, they are congratulatory towards the electorate and see this as a first step in the construction of a fairer Ireland and seek to capitalize on the momentum of the Yes campaign to secure further changes on other perceived issues such as homelessness.

The following comments align with the Yes stance. They position women’s rights as central markers of a modern nation. There is a clear rejection of historical Irish identity in the examples below, as the practices of the previous century are left to the past.

Delighted for a yes vote .my daughter and granddaughter can now have a Choice ..thats what a yes vote means CHOICE FOR ALL WOMEN OF IRELAND (845)

Welcome to the 21st century. Some people will have to be dragged kicking and screaming but luckily they are the minority ❤️❤️ (#849)

In the examples above there are clear intersections between national and gender identity themes. Many Yes users refer to “Irish women” and “women of Ireland”. For the Yes group the fair and equal treatment of women is seen as a marker of a modern and compassionate society. The language used in these examples enacts a future forward national identity as they look to the experiences of daughters and granddaughters to come who will no longer have to suffer as generations of women did before. To the Yes group the result of the referendum is a symbol of a shifting national identity that marks an end of the journey to “lonely places” made by Irish women in the past. Furthermore, the users in these examples see the repeal of the

Eighth Amendment as a move towards a more caring and compassionate Irish identity that provides for its citizens at home rather than exporting them as problems for other countries to deal with. The Yes group is hopeful for the future of Ireland. The outcome of the referendum is a cause for national pride and celebration.

In defining what it means to be Irish many users in the data are keen to assert what it is not. Irish identity was historically defined in opposition to English identity and that strategy continues to be employed by users in this study.

[...] won't be long till we're matching the statistics of the UK where 1 in 5 pregnancies end in abortion. (#415)

Everything Ireland was founded upon will be lost here! England's influence! 🧑 (#978)

The users draw a clear moral distinction between Ireland and England. For them, the absence of legal abortion in Ireland is a source of national pride and a reflection of Irish values. Historically, emphasizing the political, social, and cultural differences between Ireland and Britain was a key strategy for Irish nationalists in constructing a new national identity post-colonial era. This strategy persists today, as seen in the abortion debate. The "No" group uses this distinction to capitalize on national pride, viewing the introduction of legal abortion in Ireland as a sign of societal decline. They fear Ireland will follow the UK's path, seeing abortion as a societal scourge.

Following the successful "Yes" vote, data shows "Yes" users attempting to revoke Irish identity from those opposing the new regime. Their victory in the referendum, with a large majority, demonstrated significant public support for widening access to abortion. The "Yes" group uses their heightened status to establish themselves as the in-group, using their power to exclude the opposition by eroding their Irishness.

You'll have to leave the country now.....just like all of our citizens have had to do because of the likes of you. (#893)

"Sad day for Ireland :(don't like it? Pack your bags and hop on a flight/ferry like you'd callously rather so many vulnerable women before you. (#341)

The language in these examples makes clear that some of those espousing the “new” Ireland identity do not welcome those who oppose the Yes group’s beliefs.

Finally, in terms of conflicting religious identities, the following interaction illustrates two opposing views on the waning influence of organised religion in Ireland. For one group this represents a loss of morality, for others this is something to be celebrated and aligns with the future forward vision of Ireland.

The country of Ireland has lost its religious and moral value when it comes to the beginning of life Its very sad (#564)

the country of Ireland is breaking the chains of the Catholic Church and she is taking deep breaths of freedom and enlightenment. And it's truly beautiful :) (#566)

We can see that Yes users perceive the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland as promoting a national identity of enslavement, from which the Irish people are now breaking free. To the Yes group the waning influence of the Church has helped to usher in a new era of identity encompassing “freedom and enlightenment” which has resulted in positive changes to Irish society and law, including the introduction of gay marriage and now legal abortion. Rather than providing a moral code, the Church is constructed as a barrier to morality.

Discussion

This study's linguistic approach illustrates how identity shifts are indexed in language at individual and group levels. Using social media as the data source enables a bottom-up approach. By starting with lay participants' language, this study tracks group identity changes as they are co-constructed in real-time. To address the first research question: *What groups are represented in social media discourse about abortion in Ireland?*, the study began by classifying and quantifying user comments to identify distinct participant groups. These included Yes supporters, No supporters, and undecided voters. The second stage of analysis responds to the question: *How is Irish national identity constructed and positioned by lay users in social media discourse about abortion?* It reveals how language is used to reproduce or resist power structures, and how abortion discourse became a site for negotiating and redefining Irish national identity. Drawing on Wodak et al.'s (2009) framework, the analysis revealed that identity was not static but actively negotiated through language. This aligns with Anderson's (1991) concept of nations as “imagined communities,” where identity is shaped through shared narratives and reinforced, in

this case, through social media discourse. Although both groups share common national heritage features, this does not lead to shared opinions. Nationality is the common thread in the discourse, with competing versions of Ireland serving as the foundation for clashes between the Yes and No groups. The study revealed an Irish identity that is both changed and changing. Macro analysis of the online discourse about the Eighth Amendment shows multiple evolving Irish national identities and how this shift is indexed in language. Two conflicting versions of Irish identity emerged from the data, with both Yes and No groups trying to establish themselves as the more authentically Irish group. Yes users framed the referendum as a moment of moral reckoning, using language that emphasised progress, compassion, and autonomy, values that are increasingly associated with modern Irish identity (Strange, 2022).

The Yes group aligns with a modern, secular Ireland where Church and state are separate, and women's freedom of choice and bodily autonomy are central. The repeal of the Eighth Amendment is seen by Yes users as the final blow to the historical version of Ireland. In contrast, the No group supports a traditional, conservative version of Ireland, proud of its differences from England, especially regarding abortion, reinforcing previous work (Kornprobst, 2005; White, 2010) about the role of anti-British sentiment in Irish identity formation. While overt religious references were limited, the moral framework of the No group closely aligned with Christian teachings, suggesting that religious identity remains embedded in cultural discourse even when not explicitly stated.

In sum, this study demonstrates how social media discourse reflects and contributes to the ongoing redefinition of Irish national identity. The language used by lay participants reveals a nation grappling with its past and envisioning its future, with abortion discourse serving as a lens through which broader cultural and political shifts are negotiated.

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