A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ACTIVISTS' USE OF PROTEST STICKERS

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Abstract

Often dismissed as low level crime, protest stickering represents a sophisticated form of street based political communication. Drawing on cultural criminology and semi-structured interviews with five UK based individuals from across the ideological spectrum, this paper investigates the motivations of sticker activists. The findings reveal a striking tactical convergence amongst all groups where the protest sticker serves as a critical gateway mechanism in the online offline nexus, designed to drive physical world observers into digital recruitment channels. Also, opposing groups utilise identical strategies of territorial claim making, specifically targeting university campuses as symbolic battlegrounds for ideological radicalisation. In addition, participants actively embrace the illegality of stickering, rationalising it not as a deterrent but as a performative act of civil disobedience that signals commitment and rejects the state's regulation of public space. By framing this petty crime as an overall coherent strategy, the paper highlights how sticker activism functions as a tool for contesting social control and facilitating subcultural identity construction in the urban environment.

Key words: Protest stickers; online offline nexus; territorial claim making; radicalisation; cultural criminology; public space.

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1. Introduction

Street furniture in the contemporary urban landscape serves as a public canvas, a palimpsest of layered, adhesive messages (Awcock & Rosenberg, 2024), where the physical acts of protest stickers being 'stuck up, peeled off, covered up' (Bodden & Awcock, 2024:131) become a form of public, material interchange. The landscape of 'sociocultural authorization of signage' (Reershemius & Ziegler, 2024:118) constitutes a distinct layer of urban communication, often organised into dense 'lamppost networks' (Reershemius, 2019:622) that proliferate in pedestrian transit spaces with their patchwork of competing symbols and slogans, that range from anti-fascist logos and climate warnings to anti-immigration rhetoric and extremist propaganda, making it the frontline of a very public culture war. This phenomenon is global in scope, be it visible in the post-it notes of Hong Kong's 'Lennon Walls' (Li and Liu, 2021:68; Corlin, 2024:69;), the post-apartheid Cape Town 'creative protest' (Makhubu, 2017:686), the shifting 'linguistic landscape' (Karam et al., 2023:133) of Beirut following popular uprisings, the 'visual resistance' (Aravena-Ortiz, 2023:44) that transformed the walls of Santiago into a canvas for symbolic disputes during the 2019 Chilean demonstrations, and in the 'visual framing' (Whitworth & Li, 2023:19) in Hong Kong, which situated new issues within existing protest lexicons.

Such protest stickers are a semi-permanent, low cost, material form of political expression (Awcock, 2021) that are frequently dismissed as low level crime, whilst at the same time functioning as a dispersed network of semiotic claims, marking territory (Wachendorff, 2024), facilitating the 'political and symbolic occupation' (Ferreira et al., 2025:37) of urban space, and communicating ideology to a mass audience in the course of everyday life.

Academic inquiry has mapped the geographies of these objects, analysing their function as material, semiotic, and low cost modes of claim making (Awcock, 2021; Hill, 2024a) and

academics have explored this street media in urban activist scenes (Gerbaudo, 2014), as a form of street art (Clough, 2011), and as an international language of subculture and dissent (Bloch & Phillips, 2020). In addition, studies have noted the rising use of stickers as a key recruitment and radicalisation tool for extremist groups, particularly on the far-right (Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, 2011; Simi et al., 2016).

While the geography and content of these stickers are well documented, the sticker activists themselves remain largely invisible in the literature. As a result, there is a lack of comparative qualitative insight into the activists' motivations, an omission that is particularly striking given the polarised nature of the content. This presents an opportunity to investigate and answer the research question of why do ideologically divergent activist groups use protest stickers as a tool for political communication, territorial claim making, and identity building in the contested streetscape of the UK?

This convergence is not merely a tactical choice but it appears to be a strategic response shaped by the specific ‘mediality’ (Reershemius & Ziegler, 2024:115) and ‘affordances’ (Gibson, 2014:119) of the protest sticker, and this paper addresses this puzzle directly by drawing on a unique dataset of in depth, semi-structured interviews with five UK based protest sticker activists. The participants were selected to represent a cross section of the ideologies currently vying for public visibility.

Through a thematic analysis of these transcripts, this paper argues that for these ideologically divergent groups, protest stickers are not insignificant acts but are conceptualised as a crucial, low cost, high impact form of guerilla semiotics (Eco, 1986). This strategy is remarkably coherent across all five participants, despite their opposing goals. Stickers are strategically deployed to act as a vital physical hook or gateway for digital recruitment, forming a critical online offline nexus (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). In addition they make territorial claims

on contested spaces, with universities identified by all interviewees as a primary battleground. Protest sticker placement is also deemed a conscious act of civil disobedience that simultaneously communicates defiance against a corrupt system and solidifies in-group identity, or, in other contexts, to consciously depoliticise illicit practice as a claim for agency outside of state controlled discourse (Vasileva, 2025).

To unpack the placing of protest stickers by activists, the analysis begins by anchoring the protest sticker within the wider theoretical landscape, specifically at the intersection of cultural criminology and urban geography. It then shifts focus to the empirical core of the study using the activists' own narratives which outlines the phenomenological approach used to capture their conflicting motivations. The subsequent discussion synthesises these findings to map the shared tactical ground between these polarised groups, identifies the paper's limitations, and concludes with a reflection on the implications of this street level battle for the future of public space.

2. Literature review

The study of protest stickers sits at the intersection of the several academic disciplines of cultural criminology, social movement studies, media and communication, urban geography, and visual culture. To frame the analysis of the interview data, this review integrates scholarship from these diverse fields to build a theoretical framework for sticker activism.

2.1 Cultural criminology and sticker activism

Cultural criminology, which examines the intersections of culture, meaning, and transgression (Ferrell et al., 2008), is a primary lens through which to view the unauthorised placement of protest stickers on urban surfaces. The act of protest sticker placement constitutes a form of symbolic resistance, a micro political act that reclaims public space to contest dominant discourses, blurring the boundaries between art, protest, and deviance. It embodies expressive

practices through which activists articulate identity, belonging, and dissent (Ferrell, 1993), whilst the state and institutional responses to such activity reveal the everyday mechanisms of social control that cultural criminology seeks to expose, with sticker activism exemplifying how meaning, resistance, and regulation are negotiated through the visual and spatial politics of the urban environment.

2.2 The sticker as a political object - materiality and affordances

Social movement studies have undergone a material turn (Akrich, 1992), paying closer attention to the non-human objects, technologies, and artefacts that shape and enable protest with the protest sticker a prime example of a simple object whose powerful affordances determine its possible uses (Gibson, 2014). The protest sticker has been conceptualised as a specific communicative genre with distinct linguistic and material characteristics (Reershemius, 2019; Reershemius & Ziegler, 2024).

It is also defined by its material properties of being cheap to produce, small, portable, and adhesive and this democratises its use, making it accessible to grassroots groups with limited resources, unlike more expensive media (Awcock, 2021). This accessibility and low risk nature is particularly crucial for marginalised groups, such as women, for whom other forms of street intervention may pose greater physical dangers (Ferreira et al., 2025). Its second key affordance is its permanence when factored against a digital post that disappears in a feed or a protest chant that vanishes as the crowd disperses, as it offers a persistent, durable presence in the physical world, where its persistence allows it to function as a form of ambient protest (Wilson, 2014; Hancox, 2024), an ever present reminder of a political message that integrates into the background radiation of urban life (Roquet, 2016).

Such material persistence makes it difficult to remove, forcing authorities to expend resources on its erasure, which in itself is a minor victory of attrition for the activist. The specific material

qualities of a sticker directly impact how others can interact with it, for instance, by writing on, scratching away, or covering it, turning the sticker itself into a site of ongoing contestation and this is not just symbolic as the material interactions of being 'stuck up, peeled off, covered up...and scribbled out…[constitute a form of] ordinary politics' (Bodden & Awcock, 2024:131). Linguistically, stickers are designed for rapid perception, however, as they often do not contain full texts but function as a 'communicative minimal unit' (Reershemius & Ziegler, 2024:117), they convey their message through simplicity, with a focus on content including words and graphics, often linking to the online world. In addition, the act of placing a sticker is a form of 'self-authorized signage' (ibid:113) and this term reframes the act not merely as 'transgressive' (ibid) or illegal, but as a deliberate claim of authority to place messages in public space without institutional sanction.

2.3 Contested spaces - territoriality and urban claim making

The placement of a sticker is never random, it is a profoundly geographical act (Awcock, 2021). Stickers are used to mark, claim, and contest territory and this aligns with prior academic work on the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996; Harvey, 2012), which posits urban space not as a neutral container, but as a social and political product, a site of constant struggle and contested urbanism (Iveson, 2013).

Gerbaudo's (2014) work on spikey posters and street media in urban activist scenes is particularly relevant in this regard and he argues that such media are used 'as a practice of diffuse boundary-making, constructing a sense of antagonistic territoriality around the movement strongholds' (Gerbaudo, 2014:246). This is vividly illustrated in the 'territorial marking' (Wachendorff, 2024:175) practices of rival football fan cultures, who use stickers to compete for visibility and assert dominance over specific urban neighbourhoods by creating a sense of place for the in-group and a signal of exclusion for the out-group, with this process

being evident globally. In Cape Town, activists engage in plakking (the Afrikaans term for stickering or pasting) to challenge the official 'legibility' (Makhubu, 2017:686) of a city still shaped by the spatial logic of apartheid, using stickers to reclaim histories and contest gentrification. Similarly, analysis of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement shows how protest signage contributes to a process of 'deterritorialization and reterritorialization' (Martin-Rojo, 2014:625) creating a 'paper city' (Anfinson, 2015 cited in Lou & Jaworski, 2016:618) that overlays the existing urban infrastructure with new, protest oriented meanings, with the overlaying functioning as a form of 'visual resistance' (Aravena-Ortiz, 2023:44) which transforms public space into a dynamic site of 'contention and mobilization' (Whitworth & Li, 2023:20) where, as seen in Hong Kong, the physical placement of new material (e.g., about COVID-19) on existing 'Lennon Walls' (Whitworth & Li, 2023:19) explicitly frames the new issue within the symbolic lexicon of the ongoing protest movement.

The proliferation of competing stickers from opposing groups constitutes a physical, sociomaterial claim making (Awcock, 2021) process where lampposts and walls become a visible ledger of ideological conflict. Such a dynamic can be understood as a form of 'asynchronous narrative layering' (Karam et al., 2023:133), where each sticker is a response to, or a layer upon, previous messages, creating a diachronic, material conversation on the city's surfaces and this is often concentrated in specific transit spaces, where the lampposts become hubs of communication for particular subcultures (Reershemius, 2019).

2.4 Guerilla semiotics - stickers as visual political communication

Beyond their material and spatial function, protest stickers are fundamentally acts of communication because they are a form of guerilla semiotics (Eco, 1986), a grassroots deployment to disrupt or counter dominant narratives (Hall, 2018). As they are viewed in passing, their message must be instantaneous and this necessitates the use of cognitive shortcuts

(Schill, 2012), relying on simple, bold graphics, recognisable logos (e.g., the Antifa double-flag, the XR hourglass), and short, sharp slogans. This semiotic work extends to the specific typographic articulation of the message, where the choice of a typeface can be a deliberate strategy of othering an opponent or, conversely, using scriptural fonts can connote affection and in-group loyalty (Wachendorff, 2024) where such processes function as branding mechanisms (Tedford, 2021; Tedford, 2022a).

The process of visual branding is central to a movement's identity. The 'Bollocks to Brexit' (Awcock, 2023:138) campaign, used a simple, recognisable design (fluorescent yellow background, blocky black font) to create a powerful form of contentious branding that became so effective it was adopted by an established political party (Bodden & Awcock, 2024). This demonstrates how signage can 'mythologize' (Lou & Jaworski, 2016:613) a movement, turning simple objects and phrases into powerful, unifying symbols, where a key strategic development can be the evolution from polyvocality to a unified iconography. An example of this is the 2019 Hong Kong protests that began with 'Lennon Walls' (Li & Liu, 2021:68) covered in thousands of unique, handwritten sticky notes, representing a multiplicity of individual voices. As the movement progressed, these were largely replaced by mass produced posters featuring a smaller, repeated set of 'visual iconographies…[for]…collective identification' (Corlin, 2024:113), demonstrating a strategic shift towards a more cohesive and branded visual identity where this strategy involved both the 'reproduction of already established signs and the…[creation]…of new imaginaries' (Aravena-Ortiz, 2023:44) that serve as 'collective action frames' (Whitworth & Li, 2023:19) to unify the movement's message.

Communicative function is not always benign as the same affordances that make stickers effective for climate protest or anti-fascism also make them a potent weapon for extremist propaganda. Reports on far-right extremism have explicitly highlighted the use of stickers as a

key vector for recruitment and radicalisation (Simi et al., 2016) where they are used to normalise hateful ideologies, intimidate minority populations (Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, 2011), and signpost potential recruits to extremist online forums. The sticker, therefore, operates in a liminal space between art (Tedford, 2022b), protest, and propaganda.

2.5 The online offline nexus - from lamppost to Telegram

Perhaps the most critical function of the contemporary protest sticker is its role in bridging the physical and digital worlds and modern social movements are defined by this online offline nexus (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). Whilst the digital tools of social media and encrypted messaging are essential for organising protest (Gerbaudo, 2012), they lack the physical permanence and struggle to reach those outside the filter bubble.

The protest sticker solves this problem as it functions as a physical advert in the real world that drives traffic to the digital movement with the meaning of a sign being transformed as it moves along from a digital design file, to a physical sticker on a lamppost, to a photograph of that sticker shared on social media, to its inclusion in a news report. This process of 'resemiotization' (Iedema, 2003:39) where meaning shifts across different media and contexts, is the core mechanism of the online offline nexus (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). The inclusion of a social media handle or a QR code, transforms the sticker from a static statement into an interactive gateway and this practice is a form of transmedia literacy (Scolari, 2019), where the narrative of the movement is dispersed across multiple platforms because the sticker acts as the signpost that guides the audience from the street to the screen.

A prime example of this is the use of 'militant street art' (Patronas, 2025:154). In the American Reproductive Justice movement groups distributed stickers with QR codes that were not just symbolic but were functional, interactive tools linking a physical location directly to digital resources, such as information on accessing abortion pills (Rinkunas, 2025). This demonstrated

the deep integration of the two realms, where material for physical placement is often produced alongside material for digital messaging apps (Corlin, 2024), turning a moment of curiosity into a new recruit.

2.6 The politics of illegality - civil disobedience and risk

Finally, stickering is almost universally illegal, constituting an act of low level crime. Such illegality is not merely a side effect as it is central to its political meaning, with academic work on civil disobedience (Brownlee, 2012) framing such law breaking as a deeply communicative act because it is a public, conscientious breach of law intended to demonstrate the illegitimacy of a given law or policy (Rawls, 1999).

For activists, their crime of stickering is a calculated act of defiance as the very illegality of their creative protest is what separates it from sanctioned, public art, and, by choosing an illegal medium, activists perform their rejection of the system's attempts to absorb and neutralise dissent (Makhubu, 2017). It is especially potent when the content itself shatters taboos, as seen in Beirut where protesters used profane language to directly name and criticise political leaders, breaking with a previous respectful discourse of protest (Karam et al., 2023).

It is also a low-risk entry point into direct action, far less perilous than a blockade or property destruction, yet it retains the thrill and political edge of transgression. Such low risk (Awcock, 2021) or ‘reduced risk’ (Ferreira et al., 2025:38) nature is a key affordance, especially for female activists who may face different and greater ‘dangers... on the street’ (Ferreira et al., 2025:54) compared to their male counterparts, and their willingness to accept this risk functions as a signal of commitment, both to the self and to the group (Klandermans, 2002). It is a physical rejection of the system and a refusal to ask permission to speak and whilst this rejection is often a conscious political statement, in other contexts, such as in authoritarian regimes, activists may engage in the opposite strategy of the deliberate depoliticisation of their

illicit sticker art. Functioning as an alternative claim for agency, it creates a space for community that exists outside the logic of state defined political resistance (Vasileva, 2025).

This literature review demonstrates that the protest sticker is a complex, multi-functional object and these themes have been brought together to comparatively analyse the articulated strategies of ideologically opposed activists by placing their voices in direct conversation with this framework.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research design to understand the deeply personal and often conflicting motivations and the shared lived experience of the activists who produce them. Such an approach seeks to understand the world from the perspective of the participants, capturing the passion, anger, and conviction that fuels their actions by focusing on their motivations.

3.1 Data collection and sampling

The primary data for this paper are five original, semi-structured interviews conducted by the author from May 2025 until September 2025. Participants were selected from a group of 15 identified sticker activists and were recruited through gatekeeper colleagues around the UK. Due to issues of accessibility and consent, five individuals who agreed to take part formed the final sample. Although the sample was therefore one of convenience, the participants nonetheless represented active members of the sticker activist community and provided insights consistent with the study's purposive orientation (Bryman, 2016). That being said, the author acknowledges that the sampling strategy tempers the broad generalisability of the findings and whilst potential selection bias from convenience sampling is a recognised limitation (ibid), this methodological choice was necessary for feasibility in accessing this specific, difficult to recruit population (Hill, 2024b). The objective was to explore and capture

a cross section of the ideologies most visibly competing for space on the street furniture of UK cities, particularly around university campuses. Participants were all offered and subsequently choose anonymity. They are referred to by the following pseudonyms:

Aaron - An anti-fascist (Antifa) activist, motivated by their feelings of community defence.

Mike - A supporter of the far-right figure Tommy Robinson[2], motivated by anti-immigrant and anti-woke sentiment.

Wayne - A populist right supporter of Reform UK[3], motivated by anti-establishment, anti-immigration, and anti-net zero views.

Amir - A pro-Palestine activist who also expresses anti-Jewish views, motivated by anti-Zionist and anti-establishment convictions.

Chloe - A climate activist with Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Just Stop Oil[4], motivated by a perceived climate emergency.

Each participant was interviewed individually via video call and never met the other participants. A consistent set of ten questions was used for each interview, allowing for comparability while also providing the flexibility for participants to elaborate on their unique perspectives. The questions covered their initial motivations, their design and production process, their choice of location for fixing stickers, their perceived impact, their relationship with the illegality of the act, and their use of online tools.

[2] Tommy Robinson (born Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) is a prominent British far right activist and co-founder of the English Defence League (EDL). He is known for his anti-Islam campaigning and has faced multiple legal convictions related to assault, fraud, and contempt of court.

[3] Reform UK is a right wing populist political party in the United Kingdom, founded in 2018 as the Brexit Party and currently led by Nigel Farage. It is characterised by its platform of immigration restriction, net zero scepticism, and economic liberalism.

[4] Extinction Rebellion (XR) is a global environmental movement founded in 2018 that utilises nonviolent civil disobedience to compel government action on climate change and biodiversity loss. Just Stop Oil, an offshoot established in 2022, focuses more specifically on civil resistance to demand an immediate end to all new fossil fuel licensing and production in the United Kingdom.

3.2 Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, following the methodology of Braun & Clarke (2006). This involved the recursive process of familiarisation, initial coding (a striking initial finding was the degree of mirror imaging in tactical language used by ideologically opposed participants), searching for themes, reviewing themes, which led to the refinement of the core analytical themes presented in the Results section, defining and naming themes, and finally writing the paper.

3.3 Ethical considerations and reflexivity

The author is an independent academic unaffiliated academically with a university who undertook this work to contribute to the academic understanding of sticker activism. Guided by the British Society of Criminology's Statement of Ethics (BSC, n.d.) and the researcher's Professional Association Code of Conduct (IPSA, n.d.), it maintains transparency in the absence of institutional oversight. These frameworks informed all ethical procedures, including informed consent and participants' right to withdraw at any stage without explanation. The use of pseudonyms and the anonymisation of specific locations (beyond general references to cities or universities mentioned by participants) were essential to protect participants, all of whom are engaged in the criminal activity of stickering. For context, individuals engaged in the unauthorised placement of stickers are subject to a range of criminal sanctions under UK law, specifically, section 224 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (Legislation, 1990); Section 132 of the Highways Act 1980 (Legislation, 1980); and section 59 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 (Legislation, 2014). If convicted of an offence, penalties can be up to £2,500 with the potential for additional daily fines should the stickers remain in place following a conviction and individuals may also be held responsible for the administrative and physical costs incurred by the authority during the removal process.

Interestingly, for organisations or bodies found responsible for protest sticker placement, this fine can escalate significantly to a maximum of £20,000. The raw interview data contains views that are deeply challenging, including the anti-immigrant rhetoric of Mike and Wayne and the explicitly anti-Jewish statements of Amir. The aim of this methodology is not to endorse or sanitise these views, but to present them accurately as part of the data, analysing them as a form of political communication and propaganda within the broader context of sticker activism.

4. Results

The thematic analysis of the five interviews revealed a remarkable convergence of strategy and conceptualisation. Despite their profound ideological differences, Aaron, Mike, Wayne, Amir, and Chloe articulated near identical approaches to the why and how of protest stickering, and this section presents these findings, organised into four key themes, ensuring the voice of each participant is represented.

4.1 Theme 1 - The university as a battleground for hearts and minds

The most striking point of consensus was the strategic targeting of universities. All five activists, from far-left to far-right, identified university campuses as the primary “battleground” for their ideological struggle.

Aaron, the anti-fascist, described the university as a "fucking battleground, mate". His group focuses on campuses because "The right are always trying to recruit there... unis are where the youth are, mate... full of impressionable kids who might get sucked into far-right crap if we don't counter it". For Aaron, stickering the campus is a "visual show of strength" to show new students that an "anti-fascist community" is present.

Mike, the Tommy Robinson supporter, mirrored this sentiment from the opposite pole. He called the university the "belly of the beast" and a "bloody factory for woke nonsense". His motivation for targeting students was identical to Aaron's: "Young people, impressionable...

they need a dose of reality... we put the stickers up there to... give them the other side of the story that their lefty professors won't tell them. It's about fighting the brainwashing".

Wayne, the Reform UK supporter, used the same "factory" metaphor, stating universities are "where the rot starts" and "woke factories". He targets them because "that's where the next gen gets radicalised" and "they're full of future workers, future taxpayers". His goal is to "give the other side... let the kids know there's another way of thinking that isn't some mad left-wing fantasy".

Amir, the pro-Palestine activist, identified the university as "ground zero for their propaganda". He targets them because of their perceived "complicity" with Israel, citing "arms contracts or research funding we oppose". He noted that "Unis got loads of Jewish societies pushin' pro-Israel crap... students are open-minded, but blind to the Zionist control". His goal is to "call out that complicity" and "educate the students".

Finally, Chloe, the climate activist, targets universities because of their "breathtaking... hypocrisy". She stated, "The university puts out all these press releases about its sustainability goals... at the same time, their pension funds are invested in Shell and BP... It's disgusting". For her, stickering is about "exposing that greenwashing, right where it happens", as students "are a demographic that will inherit the crisis".

4.2 Theme 2 - The "sticker war" and territorial claim making

All participants conceptualised their stickering as part of a direct, physical conflict for public space, frequently described as a "war." This "war" was primarily fought by physically removing or, more significantly, covering the stickers of their opponents.

Aaron was explicit: "It's not a sticker war, it's just war... when we see fascist, racist, transphobic shit, we destroy it… no question... you slap one of ours right over the top of it, like a performance. It's a direct, physical act of cancellation... you're fighting for every space".

Mike was equally explicit: "Oh yeah, it's a war, proper war… you see all the commie shit everywhere... if I sees one of them, I'll rip it off... I'll stick it right on top… It's a fight for our streets... every lamppost is a little piece of territory, and we're not surrendering".

Amir described the same process: "You mean Zionist propaganda?... yeah, we see it, and we tear it down. Or we cover it. Scratch the Zionist ones and add mine... we put up stickers that say 'Free Palestine' right over the top. It's a fight for public space, and we will not let them claim it".

Wayne described a "tug of war", stating, "If I've got a scraper in the van, I'll take it off, cover lefty crap... they're trying to make our country look like something it's not. I'm just... restoring a bit of balance".

Chloe's "war" had a different target, but the tactic was identical. Her "real sticker war" is "us versus the multi-billion dollar death machine". The enemy is not another activist group, but corporate advertising. She stated, "I'll slap a 'Just Stop Oil' sticker over a BP advert any day of the week... that's the real sticker war". This act of "subverting" corporate messaging was a core tactic.

4.3 Theme 3 - The online offline nexus - the sticker as a "gateway"

A central and unanimous theme was the conceptualisation of the physical sticker as a mere "advert" for the real site of mobilisation that is the digital world. The sticker's primary function is to act as a bridge, driving physical world traffic to online platforms.

Aaron called this link "Crucial, mate. The sticker on the street is the hook. It grabs someone's attention. But the QR code, that's the gateway... It connects the physical action to the digital organising space... the street and the screen, they're two sides of the same coin".

Mike declared, "It's everything. The mainstream media is the enemy... the internet is the only place you can get the real story... the sticker is just the advert. It points people to the right channels on Telegram and YouTube... It's our own media".

Wayne agreed, stating, "It's massive. It's where you get the real news. The sticker's just a... a signpost. It gets people to look up Reform, to watch Nigel[5] on YouTube... if you don't have a link, it's a dead end".

Amir labelled the connection "vital… so our stickers, they're like a bridge. They take people from the street to the real information online... a QR code can link to a video of an Israeli atrocity, or a list of companies to boycott... that radicalises people in our cause. It's how we bypass the censors".

Chloe articulated the same strategy: "It's absolutely crucial. The sticker is the physical prompt, but the online space is where we can give people the full information... we always pair offline and online tactics... it's how we turn a moment of curiosity into a new recruit".

4.4 Theme 4 - Rationalising illegality - defiance, duty, and disobedience

All five participants were fully aware that their actions constituted crime. However, far from being a deterrent, this illegality was framed as a necessary, justified, and even motivational component of the act.

Aaron framed it as principled defiance: "Of course it's illegal. The whole system is set up to protect the powerful... the illegality is part of the point. It's direct action... it's civil disobedience. We're not asking for permission to fight Nazis. We're just doing it". He added, "Risk shows commitment".

[5] Nigel Farage is a British right wing populist politician, Member of Parliament for Clacton, and current leader of Reform UK. A central figure in the movement for the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, he previously led the UK Independence Party and the Brexit Party.

Mike was contemptuous of the law: "It's a bloody sticker, not a bomb... the fact that the police... get their knickers in a twist about it just proves our point... it's a joke, bollocks laws. It just shows how scared they are of the truth". For him, the "Risk makes it real, fighting the tyranny".

Wayne was similarly dismissive, framing it as a free speech issue: "Illegal? Piss off, it's a sticker, it's speech. The police should be out catching burglars... proves the whole system's priorities are arse-backwards". The risk itself was motivating: "the illegality gives it a kick... you're not just typing, you're acting".

Amir framed the law itself as immoral: "What's illegal? Supporting genocide is legal?... But putting up a sticker telling the truth is a crime? It shows you how corrupt the whole system is... I don't give a shit about their laws. My motivation is justice for my people".

Finally, Chloe provided the most formal articulation, framing it as a moral duty: "We practice civil resistance... what is truly criminal is our government's inaction... In that context, what is a sticker on a lamppost?... It's a moral duty. I'm willing to risk arrest again... the risk is nothing compared to the risk of doing nothing".

5. Discussion

The results demonstrate a surprising tactical coherence among intensely polarised political actors. All of the five activists have independently developed and rationalised an identical, sophisticated, and multi-layered strategy for the use of protest stickers, and whilst their goals are mutually exclusive, their methods are perfectly mirrored. This discussion analyses the implications of these shared themes, connecting them back to the literature.

5.1 The university as a symbolic battleground

The unanimous identification of the university as the primary "battleground" (Aaron) and "ground zero" (Amir) is a significant finding. This is not simply, as Aaron noted, because of

"high footfall", rather, it is because the university is a symbolic space. It is seen as the "factory" (Mike, Wayne) where the next generation of elites, voters, and activists are "brainwashed" (Mike) or "radicalised" (Wayne). This finding powerfully supports Gerbaudo's (2014) concept of territoriality but adds a new dimension. The sticker war is not just for turf in a geographical sense, but for the symbolic heartland of ideology.

By stickering the campus, these activists are engaging in an act of 'reterritorialization' (Martin-Rojo, 2014:625) of a symbolic space. They are not just communicating to students, they are physically challenging the legitimacy and official 'legibility' (Makhubu, 2017:686) of the institution itself. Aaron is challenging its "neutrality", Mike and Wayne are challenging its "woke" curriculum, Amir is challenging its "complicity" in foreign conflicts, and Chloe is challenging its "hypocrisy" and corporate ties. The sticker is a sociomaterial claim (Awcock, 2021) that the institution has failed and that an alternative truth is now being posted on its own gates, overlaying its physical and symbolic space with a counter narrative.

5.2 The sticker war as physical ideological conflict

The data on the sticker war provides a visceral, physical manifestation of the culture war. The act of "slap[ping] one of ours right over the top" (Aaron) is a "direct, physical act of cancellation" (Aaron) that is far more tangible than any online dispute. This supports literature on culture jamming (Lasn, 2000), but with a more aggressive, territorial component. While Chloe's "subversion" of BP adverts is a classic culture jam, the actions of Aaron, Mike, Amir, and Wayne are an uncompromising, physical struggle for dominance.

Mike's statement, "Every lamppost is a little piece of territory", is the most succinct articulation of this. This physical struggle can be understood as a material manifestation of 'asynchronous narrative layering' (Karam et al., 2023:33). Each act of covering an opponent's sticker is not just erasure but a reply in a physical, diachronic conversation. The lamppost becomes a layered

transcript of this public argument, where the public sphere is viewed as a finite resource that must be "won" (Aaron, Mike) or "restored" (Wayne). Such "erasure" (Amir) and the resulting "fight for public space" (Amir) demonstrates a competitive view of political discourse, reflecting the intense polarisation of the contemporary moment. It is, as Simmel (1950) might argue, the mental life of the metropolis made manifest, where the sheer density of competing stimuli requires a forceful, aggressive claim to be noticed at all.

5.3 The analogue hook for the digital movement

The most critical finding for understanding sticker activism is the unanimous conceptualisation of the sticker as an analogue hook for a digital first movement. This paper empirically confirms, from the activists' perspective, the centrality of the online offline nexus (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). The sticker solves the last mile problem for digital activism. Online movements are highly effective at mobilising the already committed but struggle to reach the "ordinary bloke" (Mike), the "silent majority" (Wayne), or the "curious" person (Aaron) who is not in their Telegram channels or following their hashtags.

The sticker, as a "physical prompt" (Chloe), is the perfect tool. It is ambient (Wilson, 2014; Roquet, 2016; Hancox, 2024), reaching people in their everyday, offline lives. The QR code acts as the "gateway" (Aaron) or "bridge" (Amir), instantly converting a moment of physical world "curiosity" (Chloe) into a digital world "recruit" (Chloe). This finding refines Gerbaudo's (2012:5) ‘choreography of assembly’, where digital tools call out to the streets. Here, the streets call back. The sticker is the "advert" (Mike) for the real site of mobilisation, which for all groups is online.

However, the sticker's function is dual. Beyond its forward looking role as a "gateway", it also serves a backward looking function as an act of archiving. In the face of a state that can erase digital records or control official narratives, the material persistence of the sticker is a crucial

act of resistance. This is driven by what has been termed an ‘archival imagination’ (Hochberg, 2021:1), a desperate need to create a physical record of a movement's existence and history. By placing a durable, material, object in the world, sticker activists create a physical trace that counters the ephemerality of a social media feed. The sticker is thus both a signpost to the future (digital recruitment) and a monument to the present (a physical archive). This is particularly chilling in the context of far-right radicalisation, confirming the signposting function noted by Simi et al. (2016). The "little red pill" (Mike) on a lamppost is the starting point of a "funnel" that leads directly to extremist content on "Telegram and YouTube" (Mike).

5.4 The performative power of petty crime

Finally, the data reveals that the illegality of stickering is not a deterrent but a core part of its strategic value. This aligns perfectly with theories of civil disobedience as a communicative act (Brownlee, 2012). The act of "breaking the law" (Chloe) is a performance that communicates the urgency of the message and the illegitimacy of the system being protested. For participants, the system is "corrupt" (Aaron, Amir), a "joke" (Mike), or "arrogant" (Wayne) and the law, therefore, is not a moral guide but a tool of the "powerful" (Aaron) or the "oppressors" (Amir).

By "refusing to ask permission" (Amir), the activist performs their rejection of this system. This can be understood as ‘self-authorized to describe signs emplaced without institutional sanction’ (Reershemius & Ziegler, 2024:113). In cities generally, where public space is heavily regulated and commercialised, the sticker activist performs a public seizure of the right to speak and mark urban space, with the minor crime being the physical manifestation of this seizure of communicative rights, a tangible rejection of the state's and capital's monopoly over the semiotic landscape.

The act of sticker placement also provides a crucial psychological benefit, that of agency. In the face of activist perceived overwhelming, systemic problems (fascism, genocide, societal collapse, the Great Replacement), the activist feels "helpless" (Amir) or "depressed" (Chloe). The physical, "hit and run" (Mike) act of stickering, with its "adrenaline" (Aaron, Mike), is a way to "do something" (Aaron). It transforms the activist from a "passive" online consumer of "crap" (Mike) into an actor (Wayne). The "risk" (Aaron, Mike, Chloe) makes the commitment "real" (Mike), forging a stronger group identity built on shared, tangible transgression.

6. Conclusion

This paper sought to answer the research question, why do ideologically divergent activist groups use protest stickers as a tool for political communication, territorial claim making, and identity building in the contested streetscape of the UK? The analysis of five interviews with a small cross section of UK activists provides a clear and compelling answer.

This paper has demonstrated that for these polarised individuals, protest sticker activism is not a random crime, but a coherent and shared strategic weapon in a culture war. By integrating theories of ‘resemiotization’ (Iedema, 2003:39), ‘archival imagination’ (Hochberg, 2021:1), and ‘asynchronous narrative layering’ (Karam et al., 2023:133), this paper provides a more sophisticated model for understanding the phenomenon of protest sticker activism.

The research has provided rare, comparative qualitative data from protest sticker activists, revealing a mirror imaging of tactics. An anti-fascist and a far-right activist, in their fight for the "soul" of "impressionable kids" (Aaron, Mike), will use the same lamppost, the same university gate, and the same rationale.

By empirically grounding the online offline nexus (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017) from the activist's perspective, the research has shown precisely how the protest sticker has been re-tooled to become the essential "hook" (Aaron) and "gateway" (Aaron) for digital first

movements, while also functioning as a crucial act of physical archiving to resist erasure (Corlin, 2024).

This has reframed the sticker war as a physical, territorial, and deeply symbolic battle for institutional and public space with the targeting of the university by all groups revealing a shared belief that this space is the "factory" (Mike, Wayne) of future ideology, making it the primary "battleground" (Aaron) for a war of guerilla semiotics (Eco, 1986) aimed at the ‘reterritorialization’ (Martin-Rojo, 2014:625) of symbolic ground.

The paper has also highlighted how the shared, minor illegality of the act is not a barrier but a feature. It is a calculated, performative act of self ‘authorization’ (Reershemius and Ziegler, 2024:118) that communicates defiance, builds agency, and signals commitment.

The limitations of this study primarily stem from the size and qualitative nature of the participant group, which prioritises depth of insight over breadth. While these five individuals offer a rich cross section of experiences, the study does not seek to provide complete representation of their respective movements. As previously noted, the chosen recruitment strategy focuses on the specificities of these cases rather than broad transferability. Furthermore, while the use of convenience recruitment is a recognised methodological boundary (Bryman, 2016), this approach was a necessary concession to the practical challenges of engaging with this specific population (Hill, 2024b). The study is geographically limited to the UK context and, specifically, the university town environment. Future research should build on these findings. Quantitative studies could map sticker density against online recruitment data to test the gateway hypothesis. Comparative ethnographic work could explore how these tactics differ in non-UK or non-university contexts, applying the integrated model developed here to other forms of Reershemius & Ziegler’s (2024) concept of media that has been self-authorised. Further research is also needed into the darker side of this phenomenon, particularly

the efficacy of extremist stickering, to build on the work of Simi et al. (2016), and the radicalising effect this can have on viewers.

In conclusion, this paper reveals a critical truth about protest stickers. As formal discourse becomes more contained and digital life more ephemeral, the culture war is being fought, quite literally, on the streets. The protest sticker, cheap to print and quick to place, has become a potent, durable, and versatile weapon in the ongoing battle for our shared public spaces.

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