PROTEST STICKERS IN THE VICINITY OF UK UNIVERSITY SPACES: A BREACH OF THE PREVENT DUTY?

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates that the protest sticker can serve as a potent catalyst of radicalisation within the vicinities of university campuses. Ubiquitous on street furniture surrounding these locations, protest stickers function as tangible points of ideological friction and territorial markers. By applying the theoretical framework of microradicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation, this paper argues that protest stickers have the potential to shape the radicalisation journey. This theoretical approach is substantiated by drawing on two distinct data sets of the author's primary research conducted with 17 undergraduate students from universities in Bath, Bristol, and Cardiff and five sticker activists from across the political spectrum in the UK. The findings reveal that protest sticker producers explicitly design these materials to trigger the cognitive shift of microradicalisation and incite reciprocal radicalisation via territorial conflict. The journey towards radicalisation does not always occur via direct scanning of QR codes on protest stickers, instead a process of digital curation where protest stickers are photographed and amplified within social media echo chambers is identified. The failure to manage protest stickers on street furniture in the vicinity of universities may represent a breach of the statutory PREVENT duty placed on UK Higher Education providers.

Key Words: Protest Stickers, Microradicalisation, Reciprocal Radicalisation, PREVENT, Higher Education.

1. Introduction

This paper will demonstrate that the protest sticker can serve as a potent and often underestimated catalyst of radicalisation. Ubiquitous in and around university campus on street furniture, these 'silent agitators' (Tedford, 2022b: no pagination) function as tangible points of ideological friction in public space (Clough, 2011). From the anti-capitalist messages of the Industrial Workers of the World in the 1910's to the contemporary culture wars waged over issues such as public health and national identity, the protest sticker has endured as a primary medium for grassroots political expression (Awcock, 2021; Tedford, 2022b) and is a form of

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communication that is both deeply personal and profoundly public, an intervention into the shared visual landscape of the city (Awcock, 2021; Vasileva, 2021).

By applying the theoretical framework of microradicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation developed by Bailey and Edwards (2017), this paper will demonstrate how the acts of constructing, placing, viewing, defacing or removing a protest sticker can constitute a journey towards radicalisation by arguing that protest stickers are not merely symptoms of pre-existing social tensions but are active agents that can shape such a journey by functioning as educational tools and territorial markers to gateways for recruitment into extremist ecosystems (Gerbaudo, 2013; Simi et al., 2016). While often small and ephemeral, these adhesive messages represent a direct claim on public space to inhabit and transform the urban environment (Awcock, 2021; Riggle, 2010).

This is not just a theoretical undertaking as it has profound implications for institutional responsibility within the United Kingdom's legislative framework where the 2015 Counterterrorism and Security Act places a statutory duty, known as PREVENT, on Higher Education providers to have 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism' (HM Government, 2023: 5). This safeguarding obligation requires universities to identify and mitigate the risks of radicalisation on their campuses and in their vicinity, so, when viewed through the lens of this paper's theoretical framework, this duty can be understood as a mandate to interrupt the very processes of microradicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation before they escalate (Bailey & Edwards, 2017). As this paper will demonstrate, the deployment of protest stickers represents a direct attempt to initiate these radicalising dynamics, making the management of such material, in tandem with other agencies, a critical component of UK universities compliance with its statutory duties.

The paper commences with a literature review defining the core theoretical concepts of microradicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation, before establishing a robust methodological framework. It then shifts focus to the material and affective dimensions of the protest sticker through case studies that explore its multifaceted role including its contemporary function as a physical bridge to digital radicalisation, acting as a gateway to online extremist networks. The subsequent discussion synthesises these findings with the PREVENT statutory duty in Higher Education to propose a compliance interruption mechanism, and concludes with sectoral recommendations for mitigating the risk of radicalisation.

2. Literature Review

The effectiveness of the protest sticker as a tool of political contestation is rooted in its unique material properties as they are typically small, self-adhesive pieces of paper or vinyl, which can be produced in a wide variety of formats, from simple, hand drawn tags to professionally printed, high quality graphics (Awcock, 2021; Clough, 2011). This versatility makes them an exceptionally democratic medium (Tedford, 2022a), with their low cost of production and ease of distribution making them accessible to individuals and groups with limited resources, in stark contrast to the high cost of legal advertising or mass media campaigns (Awcock, 2021; Tedford, 2022a). A single activist can carry hundreds of protest stickers and apply them rapidly and inconspicuously, maximising their potential reach with minimal risk of being caught or facing punishment (Awcock, 2021; Clough, 2011). The act of protest stickering is almost always a criminal offence (Gerbaudo, 2013; Hill, 2024) and this inherent illegality positions the protest sticker activist as undertaking edgework, a voluntary engagement with risk that provides a sense of transgression and excitement (Lyng, 1990; Lyng, 2004; Lyng, 2005). However, the low level nature of the offence and the subtlety of the act mean that protest stickering attracts a broader demographic than more confrontational forms of street art, including older activists who may no longer wish to engage in higher risk activities (Clough, 2011).

The deliberate placement of a protest sticker in public space is more than an act of communication, it is an act of appropriation as it represents a direct claim on the urban environment and an assertion of the ‘right to the city’ (Harvey, 2003: 939), a right not merely to access what already exists, but ‘a right to change it after our heart's desire’ (ibid). By affixing a protest sticker to a lamppost or a utility box, an activist temporarily alters the city, transforming a piece of neutral public infrastructure into a site of political and ideological meaning (Awcock, 2021; Riggle, 2010) as their act politicises the urban landscape, creating spaces that can be perceived as either ‘politically hostile or friendly, depending on inclination’ (Awcock, 2021: 526). This process is a direct challenge to the increasing privatisation and commercialisation of public space, which is often dominated by corporate advertising (Clough, 2011; Riggle, 2010), with street artists and activists viewing this commercial saturation as an imposition of market ideology upon city dwellers (Clough, 2011) so the protest sticker becomes a tool to ‘talk back to power’ (ibid: 6) reclaiming a small piece of the visual commons from corporate messaging and inserting a personal or political statement into the daily lives of passersby. It is a tangible, albeit ephemeral, intervention that asserts the presence of an

individual or a collective and their demand to participate in the shaping of their environment (Awcock, 2021; Vasileva, 2021).

Beyond individual acts of expression, protest stickering is a crucial practice in the demarcation of territory for political and subcultural groups as they function as 'political markers…[creating]…symbolic…paper boundaries' (Gerbaudo, 2013: 246) that signal an area is claimed by a particular movement demonstrating that the distribution of these protest stickers is not random but often 'radial' (Gerbaudo, 2013: 245), with a high concentration around a group's strongholds and a sparser distribution further afield. This spatial patterning serves a dual purpose. For sympathisers and members of the group, the dense presence of their protest stickers acts as a reassurance, a visual confirmation of their presence and control over the area whilst for political opponents, it serves as a clear warning to keep out. An activist noted that 'fascists usually don't dare to go in areas which are fly posted, also because that communicates that there are movement people going around the streets, sometimes even patrolling them' (ibid). This transforms public space into a deeply antagonistic territory, one whose internal cohesion is premised on the symbolic and, at times, physical exclusion of adversaries because the protest sticker becomes a flag, planted on the urban landscape to claim it for a cause.

The protest sticker employs a range of sophisticated communicative strategies to convey its message effectively within the constraints of its small size and the fleeting attention of the urban pedestrian. Dating back to the Industrial Workers of the World's stickerettes of the 1910's, protest stickers have been conceived as 'silent agitators' (Tedford, 2022b: no pagination) as they carried powerful anti-capitalist and pro-union messages, designed to 'intimidate bosses' (ibid) and raise worker consciousness without a single word being spoken aloud. This tradition continues today, with protest stickers using concise text and potent imagery to deliver a punch that engages passersby and offers social and political critique.

Many contemporary protest sticker campaigns function as a form of 'guerrilla education' (Tedford, 2022a: no pagination), inserting alternative or suppressed historical narratives directly into the public sphere. The 'Slavers of New York' (ibid) campaign is a prime example where the placing of protest stickers that resemble official street signs and detail the slave owning history of the figures after whom the streets are named, the activists aim to 'expose the legacy of racism and slavery' (ibid) and foster a more 'critical consciousness' (ibid) among the public. This strategy bypasses traditional educational institutions and media, bringing historical facts to light in an immediate and accessible way at the very sites of commemoration.

Protest stickers are also a low risk, high impact tool for recruitment and propaganda, particularly for far-right extremist groups (Simi et al., 2016). Research on US far-right terrorists shows that groups rely on ‘fliers, stickers and leafleting’ (ibid: 62) as marketing strategies to promote their political agenda with these campaigns often targeting marginalised and angry youth who are looking for solutions to their problems (Simi et al., 2016). In one documented case in Ayr, Scotland, the neo-Nazi group National Action provided a schoolboy with protest stickers bearing slogans like ‘multiculturalism is genocide’ (Reynolds, 2017: no pagination) and instructed him to place them in his locality as a recruitment tool. Similarly, members of National Action were convicted for plastering Aston University's campus with racially charged protest stickers reading ‘Britain is ours, the rest must go’ (The Guardian, 2020: no pagination) and interestingly, the prosecution in this case argued these protest stickers were being used as recruitment tools. This demonstrates a direct, strategic use of protest stickers not just to express an ideology, but to actively expand the group's membership by targeting university students.

The study of political conflict, particularly in the post 9/11 era, has been dominated by security focused models of radicalisation with these frameworks typically defining radicalisation as the process by which an individual or group ‘comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism’ (Bailey & Edwards, 2017: 256). Such definitions, while useful for policing purposes, are conceptually limited for a broader sociological analysis as they focus almost exclusively on a specific, and often rare transition point, the move from non-violent to violent action (Bailey & Edwards, 2017). This narrow focus overlooks the ‘pre-criminal space’ (ibid: 256) where most political conflict originates and evolves, with conventional radicalisation models being inherently status quo friendly, as they tend to define extremism and radicalism in opposition to a presumed set of normative values, such as ‘fundamental British values’ (Bailey & Edwards, 2017: 258). This approach has little sympathy for those who are disenchanted with the existing political order and may pathologise dissent that falls short of illegality (Bailey & Edwards, 2017). By concentrating on the singular, undesirable endpoint of terrorism, such models fail to capture the dynamic and process oriented nature of political conflict that manifests through radicalisation as they cannot adequately account for the smaller, everyday escalations and de-escalations that characterise political life, nor can they fully explain the symbiotic relationship between opposing political actors. To understand the protest sticker's role as a catalyst, a more holistic and process based framework is required.

Bailey and Edwards (2017) offer an expansive and sociologically robust definition of radicalisation as ‘changes in beliefs, feelings and behaviour in the direction of increased

support for a political conflict' (ibid: 256). Importantly, this definition deliberately avoids specifying an endpoint and makes no inherent value judgment as radicalisation, in this view, is a normal aspect of human social life, a property of individuals and groups. To capture the smaller, often overlooked components of this process, the concept of microradicalisation is recognised as a small, discrete movement towards conflict, and whilst it is not the entire journey to becoming a radical, it is a single step along a potential pathway to being so. Microradicalisations encompass the anger felt by an individual when faced with a perceived injustice, the emotional reaction to a provocative protest sticker message, a minor clash with authority, or a shift in one's understanding of a political issue (Bailey & Edwards, 2017). These small events, which occur in a far broader population than those who ever engage in violence, are the fundamental building blocks of larger, more serious conflicts (ibid). This is why this framework is uniquely suited to analysing the non-violent medium that is the protest sticker.

Building on this foundation, reciprocal radicalisation describes the escalating, reactive dynamic in which individuals and groups can 'move towards conflict in response to the movement of others' (ibid: 257) with this concept being broader than the more limited notion of 'cumulative extremism' (ibid), which typically describes the feedback loop between two opposing extremist groups, such as the far-right and radical Islamists. Reciprocal radicalisation encompasses the entire social field, including the interactions between activists, counter protesters, the general public, the media, and the state (Bailey & Edwards, 2017) and a crucial driver of this process is not necessarily the objective reality of an action, but the perception of that action as a threat or injustice as the same protest can be perceived by one group as legitimate free speech and by another as a threatening act of radicalisation that requires a response (ibid). This differential assessment, often filtered through pre-existing ideological lenses, is what fuels the escalatory spiral as one group's action, itself a microradicalisation, triggers a reactive microradicalisation in an opposing group, which in turn becomes a new action that prompts a further response. This framework allows for the analysis of a full spectrum of conflict, from the symbolic protest sticker wars fought on lampposts (Awcock, 2021) to the physical violence of the war of the walls (Gerbaudo, 2013) by recognising that conflict is not a linear path taken by one group in isolation, but a complex, intertwined dance of action and reaction among multiple social actors.

Bailey and Edwards (2017) work though is not without its critics. Work that pre-dated Bailey and Edwards (2017) offering, such as that espoused by Neumann (2013) and Schmid (2013) argues that conflating non-violent political radicalism with violent radicalisation is problematic, as the two often follow distinct trajectories and do not necessarily lead to one

another and that such frameworks can lead to the criminalisation of those merely disenchanted with the status quo. Later work, such as that by Pilkington (2023), challenges such process based approaches by failing to account for those that do not become radicalised when exposed to such triggers or Cassam's (2021) assertion that broadening radicalisation definitions lack conceptual precision. Notwithstanding these critiques, the framework developed by Bailey & Edwards (2017) remains a potent lens through which to investigate the radicalising effect of protest stickers due to the focus on microradicalisation and the analysis of the 'pre-criminal space' (Bailey & Edwards, 2017: 256) along with the concept of reciprocal radicalisation providing explanation for the territorial disputes that signal ideological hostility and conflict escalation.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach to explore the complex social phenomenon of protest stickers as potential catalysts for radicalisation with the central aim being to understand and interpret the processes through which they can contribute to shifts in an individual's political and ideological orientation via microradicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation. The papers epistemological stance is rooted in social constructivism, acknowledging that the meaning of a protest sticker is not inherent in the object itself but is co-created in the interaction between the object and the subjectivity of the viewer within the specific socio-political context in which the encounter takes place (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To complement the theoretical framework, this paper draws upon two data sets of original primary research conducted by the author that comprises a focus group that was conducted with 17 undergraduate students from universities in Bath, Bristol, and Cardiff to assess the reception and impact of protest stickers on the target demographic, and semi-structured interviews with five sticker activists from across the political spectrum (including Anti-Fascist, Far-Right, Climate Activist, and Pro-Palestine/Anti-Zionist).

The research design uses a multiple case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) approach as this allows for an in depth, real world investigation of several distinct, bounded cases of protest stickering and each case study represents a different manifestation of the phenomenon, from far-right recruitment campaigns and anti-fascist territorial marking to counter-hegemonic educational initiatives. By examining multiple cases, the paper facilitates a comparative analysis, highlighting both the common processes at play, for instance the triggering of an emotional response, and the contingent factors that shape different outcomes, such as the specific

ideological content and the viewer's pre-existing beliefs, as this approach provides a rich, contextualised understanding that a purely quantitative or survey based method would fail to achieve. Data for this analysis are drawn from a wide range of secondary sources, including academic journal articles, investigative reports, and government publications, alongside the primary data detailed above. The analytical process is guided by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the theoretical framework of microradicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation provides the initial, deductive lens through which the data are interpreted with the case studies being systematically examined to identify evidence of 'changes in beliefs, feelings and behavior in the direction of increased support for a political conflict' (Bailey & Edwards, 2017: 256).

The moment of encounter between a viewer and a protest sticker is the fundamental unit of analysis for understanding the protest sticker's role as it is at this nexus of image, text, location, and individual subjectivity that a microradicalisation event can occur by a discrete change in the viewer's 'beliefs, feelings, and behavior' (ibid) that shifts them, however slightly.

Data Collection and Sampling

The primary data for the student interviews were recruited using a self-selection sampling strategy, and gatekeeper colleagues facilitated this process by placing recruitment posters at identified academic institutions between October 2024 and January 2025. The recruitment pool included students from the University of Bath and Bath Spa University (n=22 expressions of interest); the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England (n=29); and Cardiff University along with Cardiff Metropolitan University (n=36). From this initial cohort of 87 potential participants, the final sample of 17 students was determined through convenience sampling criteria, specifically contingent on the maximum availability of respondents for the scheduled online focus group slot, which took place in April 2025. The ages of the students varied from 18 to 23; there were a multitude of subjects studied from engineering, sciences, maths, languages, arts and social sciences; and the students varied from years one to four of study.

The primary data for the sticker activists were 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 between February 2025 and May 2025. Due to issues of accessibility and consent, five individuals who agreed to take part formed the final sample. 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.

Ethics

The author is an independent academic unaffiliated academically with a university who undertook this work to contribute to the academic understanding of protest stickers in the context of radicalisation and their inference on the PREVENT duty for Higher Education institutions in the UK. Guided by the British Society of Criminology's Statement of Ethics and the researcher's Professional Association Code of Conduct, it maintains transparency without formalised ethics committee oversight. These frameworks informed all ethical procedures, including obtaining informed consent and participants' right to withdraw at any stage from both the sticker activist focus group and student interviews without explanation. The use of pseudonyms and the anonymisation of specific locations (beyond general references to cities mentioned by participants) were essential to protect participants.

4. Case Studies

Primary interviews with protest sticker producers reveal that the triggering of microradicalisation is often a conscious, strategic goal. 'Mike', a supporter of Tommy Robinson, explicitly describes his protest stickers as "red pills" designed to induce a cognitive shift stating "It's a little seed of doubt in someone's mind... A sticker can be the thing that wakes them up" (Mike, Interview 2). This aligns with the classification of such protest stickers as 'subcultural texts…[that function within a]…visual economy' (Goncalves et al., 2024: 209). The intent is to disrupt the viewer's reality as 'Aaron', an anti-fascist activist, notes, the goal is to show "ideas are not welcome here" and to fundamentally alter the "visual landscape of resistance" (Aaron, Interview 1).

The design choices are critical to this process and it has been argued that typography and colour are semiotic modes that 'express attitudes such as seriousness or fun' (Goncalves et al., 2024: 210). This is confirmed by 'Chloe', a climate activist, who explained that the use of "bright orange" by Just Stop Oil is a deliberate semiotic choice representing "warning signs...of emergencies" designed to be "visually disruptive" (Chloe, Interview 5). Similarly, 'Wayne', a

Reform UK supporter, emphasised that design must be "clear, direct...common sense", eschewing "poncy art" to appeal to a specific "silent majority" demographic (Wayne, Interview 3).

Case Study 1: Inducing Fear and Alienation - The Racist Protest Sticker

The proliferation of far-right and white nationalist propaganda provides a stark example of how this process can be weaponised. In Hounslow, London, protest stickers produced by the group Hundred Handers bearing slogans such as 'It's okay to be white' (Peracha, 2019: no pagination) appeared in public spaces and whilst the slogan itself is superficially innocuous, its context as part of a coordinated campaign by a far-right group reveals its true purpose of not to reassure, but to recruit and to intimidate (ibid). For the non-white population of Hounslow, which comprises around a third of its residents, the encounter with these stickers constitutes a microradicalisation event with the emotional impact being negatively profound. One account describes how these stickers leave non-white individuals feeling 'unwelcome…insecure…a little betrayed'…[and]…disturbed' (ibid) with this being not merely an unpleasant experience, rather, it is a politically significant shift as the viewer's feelings have changed in the direction of a conflict with the anonymous perpetrators of the protest stickering, with the ideology they represent, and with a society that allows such messages to appear in their community. Their sense of safety and belonging has been eroded, moving them into a more antagonistic relationship with their social environment and this affective shift is a textbook example of a microradicalisation, a direct reaction to the protest sticker activist's initial action as this microradicalisation sets the stage for a potential reciprocal action from the victim or their community, such as defacing or removing the protest sticker, which would complete the reciprocal radicalisation loop.

Case Study 2: Inducing Critical Consciousness - The Counter-Narrative Protest Sticker

In contrast, the Slavers of New York campaign demonstrates that a microradicalisation event is not inherently negative but is defined by its movement towards conflict. This 'guerrilla education initiative' (Tedford, 2022a: no pagination) places protest stickers on street signs named after historical figures, detailing their involvement in the slave trade. When residents in a neighborhood of Brooklyn encountered these protest stickers, their reaction was one of 'enlightenment' (ibid) as they reported 'rethinking the pride they felt when talking about their neighborhood name'…[and expressed an]…'eagerness to share the information with their peers' (ibid). This change also represents a microradicalisation as a previously held belief, their

uncritical pride in a local name, has been altered, moving the individual towards a conflict with a dominant and often sanitised historical narrative where the protest sticker served as the initial action in this conflict, and the viewer's change in belief is the reactive microradicalisation. This reaction can then lead to a reciprocal action, such as sharing the information or supporting the campaign, which further fuels the conflict against the established narrative thereby demonstrating the versatility of the concept where both the racist protest sticker and the anti-racist educational sticker can trigger microradicalisations, but the nature of the conflict they engender is profoundly different.

Case Study 3: Inducing Reactive Opposition - The Ideological Protest Sticker

The ideological protest sticker serves as a direct intervention in public space, designed to provoke a reaction and reinforce group identity. An anti-fascist (Antifa) protest sticker from Germany provides a clear example, featuring a fist punching a swastika with the texts 'Gegen Nazis'…[and]…'Antifa Area' (Tedford, 2018: no pagination). This protest sticker functions on multiple levels to induce microradicalisation as, for a sympathetic viewer, the protest sticker acts as a powerful reinforcement of their existing beliefs as the aggressive imagery and clear slogan can evoke feelings of solidarity with the anti-fascist cause and anger towards neo-Nazis. This change in feelings (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2010) deepens their emotional investment in the conflict, thus making it a microradicalisation event by confirming their presence in a friendly political space that strengthens their collective identity (Awcock, 2021). For an oppositional viewer though, such as a far-right sympathiser, the encounter is a direct provocation as the protest sticker represents an ideological and territorial challenge that directly invites a reciprocal response from them, illustrating how a single ideological statement can fuel the cycle of reciprocal radicalisation from multiple directions (Awcock, 2021; Gerbaudo, 2013).

Case Study 4: The Protest Sticker as a Soft Sell - Voices of Far-Right Recruiters

The use of protest stickers as a deliberate recruitment tool is confirmed by former members of far-right groups, whose accounts reveal a calculated strategy to induce microradicalisation in target audiences (Simi et al., 2016). The goal is to create 'changes in beliefs, feelings and behaviour' (Bailey & Edwards, 2017: 256) through seemingly innocuous, low cost propaganda with a former member describing their approach as 'the way I wrote literature was to make it as acceptable to the public as possible…the soft early sell was the way to go' (Simi et al., 2016: 62). Another former member framed his protest stickering as an attempt to make people think,

'We've got to open eyes, here...This is what's going on. What do you think?' (ibid). This strategy aims to initiate a microradicalisation by planting a seed of doubt or an alternative perspective. The intent though is not always subtle. Other protest sticker campaigns are designed to be overtly offensive and provocative, aiming to trigger a strong emotional reaction with a former protest sticker activist stating, 'I would put [literature] all over my school because it would have really wound people up, you know. That was what it was for me, it was to get people upset' (Simi et al., 2016: 63). This tactic seeks to create a microradicalisation through emotional agitation with campaigns often targeting specific demographics. Another former protest sticker activist explained how propaganda was designed to appeal to children and angry young men stating 'it was kind of done in like comics, like comical, to really get you to, it was to get to kids. They are appealing to...you know boys are already angry and have a lot of testosterone and they are appealing to them in any way that they can' (ibid). This highlights a sophisticated understanding of how to use a seemingly harmless medium to introduce radical beliefs to a vulnerable audience, initiating a microradicalisation process that the group hopes will culminate in recruitment. The protest sticker, in this context, is the first step in a deliberate, strategic effort to move an individual towards conflict.

Case Study 5: Protest Stickering on University Campuses

University campuses have become a significant battleground for ideological recruitment through protest stickers. Between 2016 and 2017 in the USA, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) tracked 329 such incidents across 241 different campuses (Hatewatch, 2017). Groups such as Identity Evropa and Vanguard America have led these efforts with Identity Evropa's #ProjectSiege explicitly aiming to recruit students, using protest stickers with vague slogans like 'Our Future Belongs To Us' (ibid, no pagination) superimposed over classical sculptures to appeal to a sense of white identity. This represents a calculated initial action intended to trigger a microradicalisation event in students, moving their beliefs towards the group's identitarian ideology and as the SPLC notes, protest stickering remains a key recruitment tool for hate groups, with the neo-Nazi Nationalist Social Club (NSC 131) distributing ephemeral propaganda over 130 times across the USA in 2020 alone (Bates & Gale, 2021). In the UK, all five protest sticker activists interviewed by the author targeted universities, describing them as the "battleground" (Aaron, Interview 1), the "belly of the beast" and a "bloody factory for woke nonsense" (Mike, Interview 2), "woke factories" and "that's where the next gen gets radicalised" (Wayne, Interview 3), "ground zero for their propaganda" to "educate the

students" (Amir, Interview 4) and (Chloe, Interview 5) because students "are a demographic that will inherit the…[environmental]…crisis".

While microradicalisation describes the initial spark of conflict at the individual level, reciprocal radicalisation explains how these sparks can ignite into sustained, escalating confrontations between groups with the urban landscape, and specifically the surfaces adorned with protest stickers, becoming the arena for these reactive dynamics.

Case Study 6: Low-Intensity Conflict – Protest Sticker Wars

At the lower end of the conflict spectrum are the phenomena of protest 'sticker wars…[and]…visual debate' (Awcock 2021: 525). This involves direct, literal interaction with existing protest stickers in public space where the actions are varied and include defacing protest stickers, altering their message, partially or completely removing them, or, most commonly, covering them up with a new protest sticker expressing an opposing viewpoint. This process creates a 'palimpsest of resistance' (ibid) where layers of conflicting opinions are physically superimposed on one another, creating a visible and material record of an ongoing ideological struggle. Each action in this war is a move in a reciprocal game. The placement of the first protest sticker is an action that triggers a reactive microradicalisation in an opponent and this feeling leads to a behavioral microradicalisation, which is itself a reciprocal action, inviting a further response and perpetuating the cycle of reciprocal radicalisation.

The reality of this reciprocal radicalisation is vividly confirmed by the protest sticker activists during author interviews. 'Mike' admits to a "proper war" where removing opposing protest stickers is a "fight for our streets" (Mike, Interview 2), while 'Amir' describes "scratching" Zionist stickers as a necessary erasure of "propaganda" and "colonisers" (Amir, Interview 4). Crucially, this conflict is visible to the student body. In focus groups conducted by the author, students described the layers of ripped and covered protest stickers in streets around their respective campus as a "physical argument" (Chloe, Focus Group). One student noted that seeing an obliterated protest sticker is more compelling than a fresh one because "It proves there was a conflict... It's a scar" (Tom, Focus Group). This confirms that the Reciprocal Radicalisation loop is not just an internal dynamic between extremists, but a public spectacle that signals disorder and ideological hostility to the wider university community.

Case Study 7: High-Intensity Conflict - "War of the Walls"

A far more intense and physically dangerous form of reciprocal radicalisation is detailed in Gerbaudo's (2013) research in Rome and Berlin, describing the recurrent and often violent fights between opposing political groups, primarily autonomous leftists and neo-fascists, over the control of public walls for protest stickering. The conflict goes far beyond symbolic debate. Gerbaudo (2013) documents instances of protest sticker activists being assaulted with sticks and knives while attempting to cover the protest stickers of rival groups. The history of this is steeped in violence as one neo-fascist activist was beaten to death by leftists in the 1980s while he was placing protest stickers (ibid). The reciprocal dynamic is clear and escalatory with the placement of a protest sticker being an act of territorial aggression that is driven by a powerful microradicalisation event and the violent assault by the opposing group is the extreme reciprocal action. To counter this, protest sticker activists have developed defensive measures by sometimes adding sharp materials like broken glass or light bulb fragments to the glue used to fix protest stickers, with the explicit aim of wounding anyone who tries to tear them down (Bear, 2022). Another tactic adopted is where groups organise 'activist patrols' (Gerbaudo, 2013: 246) to scout their territory and physically intercept rivals attempting to remove their protest stickers or put up their own. This demonstrates a stark escalation from the symbolic conflict of the protest sticker war to a high intensity, physically violent struggle for territorial control, a clear and dangerous manifestation of reciprocal radicalisation.

In these escalating conflicts, the physical environment itself becomes an active participant. The density and nature of protest stickers in a particular area create a distinct political atmosphere that can either invite or deter further action, establishing a powerful feedback loop that entrenches territorial control. As Gerbaudo (2013) observes, the distribution of protest stickers is most concentrated around a movement's strongholds. An activist he interviewed stated plainly, 'in an area of some hundred meters radius from a social centre you will not find any fascist posters' (ibid: 246). The sheer visual saturation of an area with one group's iconography acts as a potent, passive deterrent. Any opposing activist who ventures into this visually hostile territory to place their own protest sticker is immediately aware that they are deep in enemy territory, which significantly increases their perceived risk and discourages the act as the visual dominance creates a self-reinforcing cycle as the more protest stickers a group puts up, the more the area is perceived as theirs, which deters opponents from protest stickering, which in turn allows the dominant group to further saturate the area with their messages, solidifying their claim. The protest sticker war contends not only in active skirmishes but is won through

the slow, accretive process of creating an overwhelmingly hostile visual environment for the opposition where the landscape itself becomes a weapon in the reciprocal conflict.

In the contemporary media landscape, the protest sticker has evolved. While retaining its traditional function as a physical marker of dissent, it has also become a physical object that serves as a direct gateway to online radicalisation networks and this integration of street level propaganda with digital platforms represents a significant acceleration and amplification of the radicalisation process.

Case Study 8: The White Rose Movement

The most prominent example of this phenomenon is the White Rose movement, a decentralised network of COVID-19 conspiracy theorists and anti-vaccine activists (Marshall, 2021a; Marshall, 2021b). Their primary method of outreach and recruitment is a guerrilla campaign of protest stickering in public places (Marshall, 2021a) where the protest stickers themselves carry simple, provocative messages designed to capitalize on the frustrations and anxieties of the pandemic era, such as 'THERE IS NO PANDEMIC…[and]…Imagine a vaccine so safe you have to be blackmailed into taking it' (ibid: no pagination). The initial encounter with one of these protest stickers on a lamppost or a bus stop is designed to be a microradicalisation event, planting a seed of doubt or validating a pre-existing suspicion in the viewer (Marshall, 2021a). The crucial innovation of the White Rose campaign is the inclusion on every sticker of a QR code or a direct link to a channel on the secure messaging app Telegram (ibid). This simple addition transforms the static, one way communication of a traditional protest sticker into a gateway as a curious or sympathetic viewer can scan the code with their smartphone and be instantly transported from a physical street corner into an unregulated digital ecosystem where the protest sticker is no longer just a message, it is an invitation and a doorway.

While Marshall (ibid) highlights the QR code as such a gateway, evidence suggests the 'offline online nexus' (Androutsopoulos, 2024: 441) is more complex. Goncalves et al. (2024) argue that the QR code positions the protest sticker as a 'strategic marketing tool…[that facilitates]…ideological dissemination' (ibid: 219). However, the author's focus group data indicates wariness regarding direct scanning, with students expressing significant security concerns about scanning random codes, describing them as "sus" or "sketchy" (Ben, Focus Group). Instead, the radicalisation pathway may function through curation rather than direct scanning as students reported photographing protest stickers to share on social media to signal identity, either to express "solidarity" with an in-group or "disgust" at an out-group (Megan &

Jess, Focus Group). As one student noted, the protest sticker becomes "ammo for my own narrative" (Liam, Focus Group). This suggests that protest stickers facilitate digital radicalisation not only by leading users to extremist websites but by providing the visual content that fuels polarised social media echo chambers. 'Aaron' confirms this strategy, noting that a photo of a protest sticker on social media "builds narrative" and amplifies the message far beyond the physical lamppost (Aaron, Interview 1).

Once a user enters the White Rose Telegram account, the process of radicalisation accelerates dramatically as they are immediately immersed in what has been described as a ‘conspiracy buffet’ (Marshall, 2021b: no pagination), a relentless stream of misinformation and extremist content far exceeding the initial scope of COVID-19 scepticism. This ecosystem is designed to draw users deeper into a web of interconnected and increasingly extreme ideologies and a key mechanism for this is ‘cross-post radicalisation’ (ibid). Users who join the main White Rose channel are often automatically added to or heavily encouraged to join other, more specialised channels with content from far-right figures frequently shared, often tailored to the initial interests of the COVID-sceptic audience to create a bridge to more overtly racist, Islamophobic, or antisemitic content (ibid). This process functions as a radicalisation funnel. An individual might be drawn in by a protest sticker questioning mask mandates, but within the Telegram network, they are systematically exposed to QAnon theories, the Great Replacement conspiracy, sovereign citizen pseudo-legal arguments, and virulent antisemitism, including Holocaust denial and tropes about Jewish control of media and finance (Marshall, 2021b). The environment is one of reciprocal radicalisation on a massive scale, where potentially thousands of users in a closed echo chamber reinforce and escalate each other's beliefs. This digital ecosystem culminates in explicit calls for violence with one post shared within the network stating, ‘When your government is trying to kill you, The best way to stop them is to kill them first... We need a plan to take the government down by force’ (ibid: no pagination). This demonstrates that a microradicalisation event initiated by a protest sticker on the street can lead directly to an individual's immersion in a digital environment where they are radicalised towards committing acts of real world violence because the protest sticker has become the physical key that unlocks a digital world of escalating, reciprocal radicalisation.

5. Analysis

Protest Stickers, Radicalisation Frameworks, and the PREVENT Statutory Duty in Higher Education

The relationship between protest stickers, radicalisation, and institutional responsibility becomes particularly salient in the context of the United Kingdom's counter terrorism strategy. Under the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015, specified authorities, which include Higher Education providers in England and Wales, are subject to a statutory duty known as PREVENT which requires them to have 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism' (HM Government, 2023: 5). This duty is fundamentally a safeguarding obligation, requiring a proportionate, risk based approach to protecting students and staff who may be susceptible to radicalisation.

Interrupting Microradicalisation and Reciprocal Radicalisation through Institutional Process

The PREVENT duty, when viewed through the analytical lens of microradicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation, requires universities to implement rigorous processes for managing their physical environment. As this paper has established, protest stickers are not passive objects but are active interventions designed to trigger microradicalisation events in viewers (Bailey & Edwards, 2017). For a university, the presence of such protest stickers in the vicinity of campus represents a direct safeguarding risk to its students and the PREVENT guidance mandates that universities must take action to reduce 'permissive environments' (HM Government, 2023: 19) where radicalising ideologies can flourish.

The necessity for institutional intervention is underscored by the affective impact of these protest stickers on students. The focus group data reveals that far-right protest stickers function not merely as political speech but as territorial markings that actively degrade the sense of safety for minority students with one student describing such protest stickers as a "threat" telling specific groups "you are not safe" (Sian, Focus Group), while others described the sensation of seeing them as "creepy" and "intimidating" (Mia & Jess, Focus Group). Conversely, students noted that protest stickers from their own "in-group" provided a sense of "solidarity" and made them feel "less alone" (Megan, Focus Group). This dichotomy highlights the university's challenge as the campus visual landscape, including areas that surround it that act as areas of transit, are an active participant in student wellbeing. It has been noted that 'public space is rarely ever public' (Goncalves et al., 2024: 206) but is defined by exclusion, so universities must recognise that failing to manage this environment, in partnership with

relevant agencies, allows extremist actors to dominate the ‘visual economy’ (Goncalves et al., 2024: 209) of the wider campus, thereby creating the ‘permissive environment’ (HM Government, 2023: 19) that PREVENT explicitly warns against.

Therefore, all universities should have a robust and clearly defined process for the identification, assessment, and timely removal of any protest stickers that have the potential to radicalise. This process should apply not only to the university's own property, but those areas that act as areas of transit in the vicinity of the campus as a failure to remove such protest stickers could be interpreted as creating a ‘permissive environment’ (ibid) and thus a potential breach of the statutory duty. The process must be consistent and proportionate, balancing the duty to safeguard with the legal requirement to protect freedom of speech (HM Government, 2023). However, this protection for free speech does not extend to the encouragement of terrorism or the perpetuation of extremist narratives reasonably linked to it (ibid).

The university's responsibility also extends to managing the dynamics of reciprocal radicalisation. As seen in protest sticker wars, the act of placing and removing protest stickers can become an escalatory cycle of conflict (Awcock, 2021). A university's protest sticker removal policy must be applied impartially to all extremist ideologies to avoid being perceived as ‘taking sides’ (Bailey & Edwards, 2017: 274), a dynamic identified as a key driver of reciprocal radicalisation. By systematically removing all such material, the university can act as a de-escalating force, interrupting the cycle of action and reaction on its campus. For protest stickers located in the vicinity of the campus but not on university property, the duty is one of partnership and risk assessment. The guidance requires institutions to understand the ‘local context and risk’ (HM Government, 2023: 15) and to engage in ‘effective partnership’ (HM Government, 2023: 17) with local authorities and the police. Therefore, a university's process should include monitoring the areas immediately surrounding its campus. Where a coordinated protest stickering campaign that could affect students is identified, the university should include this in its institutional risk assessment and liaise with its local partners to ensure the timely removal of the material. This proactive engagement demonstrates the university is showing due regard for the welfare of its students by working to disrupt the cycles of microradicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation that occur at its doorstep, because a systemic failure to have such processes in place, both for its own property and for engaging with partners regarding its vicinity, would represent a significant failing in a university's safeguarding obligations under the PREVENT duty.

6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the protest sticker is a powerful and dynamic actor in political conflict and by applying the lens of microradicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation, it becomes possible to see how these small objects trigger significant changes in the beliefs and feelings of individuals, and how they fuel escalating cycles of conflict between groups. The protest sticker is not a passive reflection of social tensions, it is an active agent in their creation and intensification (Riggle, 2010).

The primary research data that informed this paper fundamentally reinforces this conclusion. Interviews with sticker activists confirm that these actors are not merely engaging in low level crime but are executing calculated strategies to "wake people up" and "claim space", consciously utilising design to trigger microradicalisation events. Furthermore, the focus group findings dispel the notion that protest stickers are ignored "background noise." Instead, they reveal that some students actively read such protest stickers as a gauge of their own safety and belonging. Also, this paper highlights a shift in the mechanism of digital radicalisation where the QR code to Telegram pipeline remains a threat, the research identifies a secondary, perhaps more pervasive pathway, the curation of protest stickers as digital content. Students using protest stickers as "ammo for their own narrative" on social media demonstrates how physical propaganda is amplified into the digital sphere, facilitating reciprocal radicalisation even without direct recruitment.

The analysis reveals the protest sticker's profound duality where on one hand, it is a tool for democratic participation and social progress by enabling 'guerrilla education' (Tedford, 2022a: no pagination) that challenges dominant historical narratives and empowers communities with knowledge, allowing marginalised voices to assert their presence and claim the 'right to the city' (Harvey, 2003: 939). On the other hand, it is a potent weapon for extremist recruitment and psychological intimidation as it can be used to spread fear and insecurity among minority populations and, in its modern iteration, to funnel vulnerable individuals from the physical street into dangerous online ecosystems where they are radicalised towards violence (Marshall, 2021b ; Peracha, 2019; Simi et al., 2016).

For universities, the implications are stark. The 'visual economy' (Goncalves et al., 2024: 209) of the campus and its vicinity is not neutral as a failure to manage this landscape allows extremist groups to dictate the territorial boundaries of the university, eroding the safety of vulnerable students and creating permissive environments for radicalisation. To comply with

the PREVENT duty, institutions must recognise the possibilities of a protest sticker in a frontline conflict that demands a proactive, safeguarding led response.

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