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Culture wars in the UK: how the public understand the debate

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Culture wars in the UK



How media discussion of

“culture wars” has exploded

There has been an explosion in UK media coverage of culture wars in recent years

There has been a huge surge in media coverage mentioning “culture wars” in recent years, with 808 articles published in UK newspapers talking about culture wars anywhere in the world in 2020 – up from 106 in 2015.

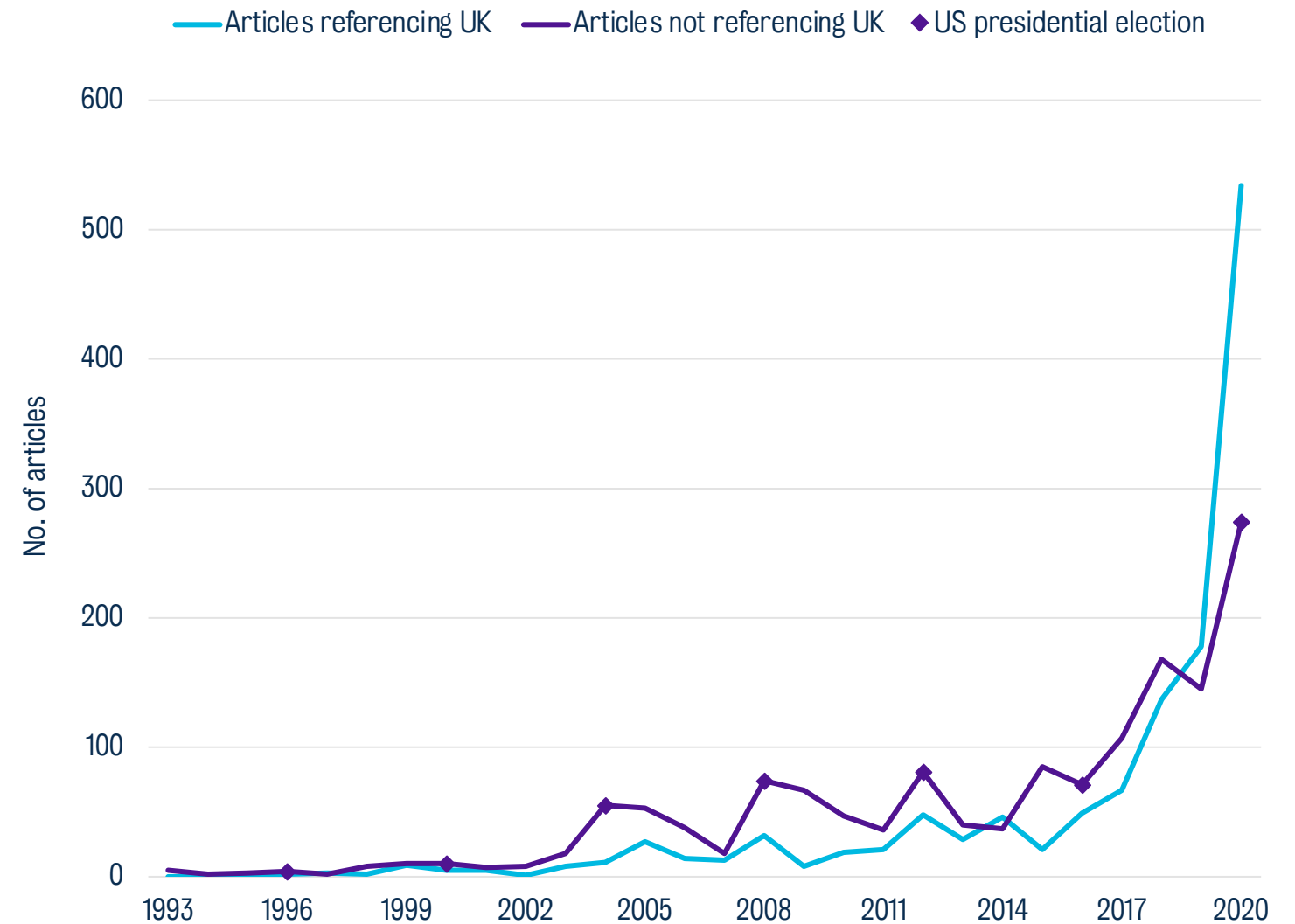
Even more strikingly, the number of articles focusing on the existence or nature of culture wars *in the UK* has gone from just 21 in 2015 to 534 in 2020.

When the term first appeared in UK newspapers, most articles related to culture wars in the US – and the influence of the US continued to be visible in the 2000s, with spikes in the number of reports mentioning culture wars following the American presidential election cycle.

Since the mid-2000s, the idea of UK specific culture wars began to gain some attention. And since 2016, coverage of the UK culture wars has taken off – surpassing the number of references to other countries in 2019 and becoming a term that has entered the journalistic vernacular to describe a wide range of cultural divides in the UK.

In recent years, use of the term in UK newspapers has also broadened in geographical scope beyond the US. Since 2015, Australia has also featured prominently, as did Brazil after the 2018 election. And there is growing discussion about culture wars across Europe, particularly in France, Italy, Ireland, Germany, Turkey and Poland.

Number of articles mentioning “culture wars” in UK newspapers, by those referencing the UK or other countries



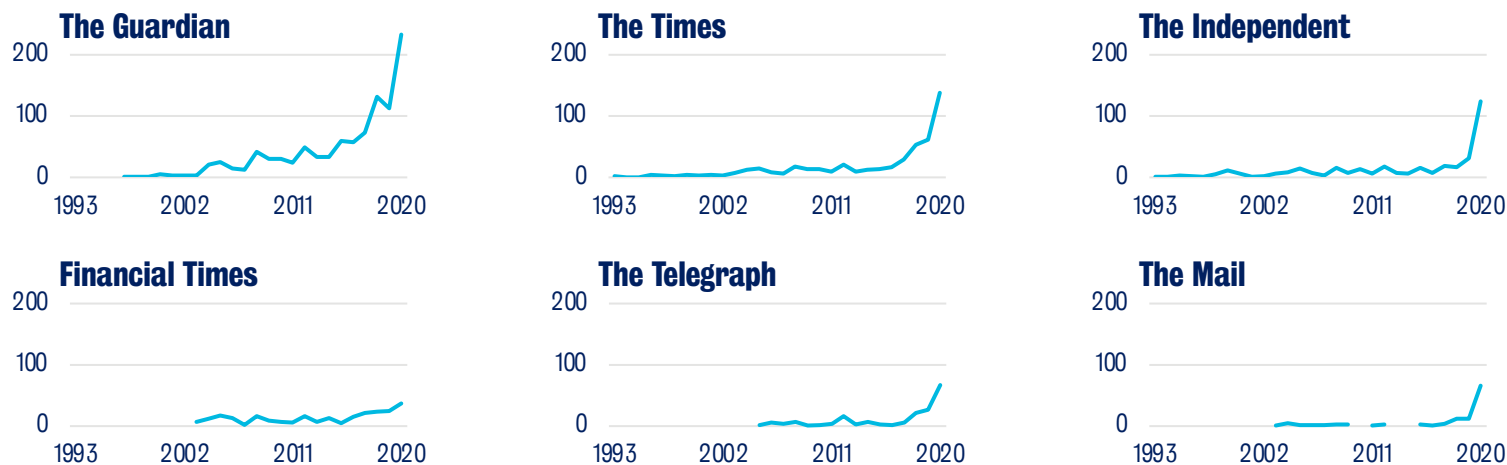
Source: Nexis (n=2,762). Country of focus primarily identified by headline; where it was not possible to determine geography from the headline, the full text was checked to determine location. The count for articles referencing the UK also includes some articles where other countries are discussed alongside the UK.

The language of “culture wars” has appeared in all major national newspapers – but in some much more than others

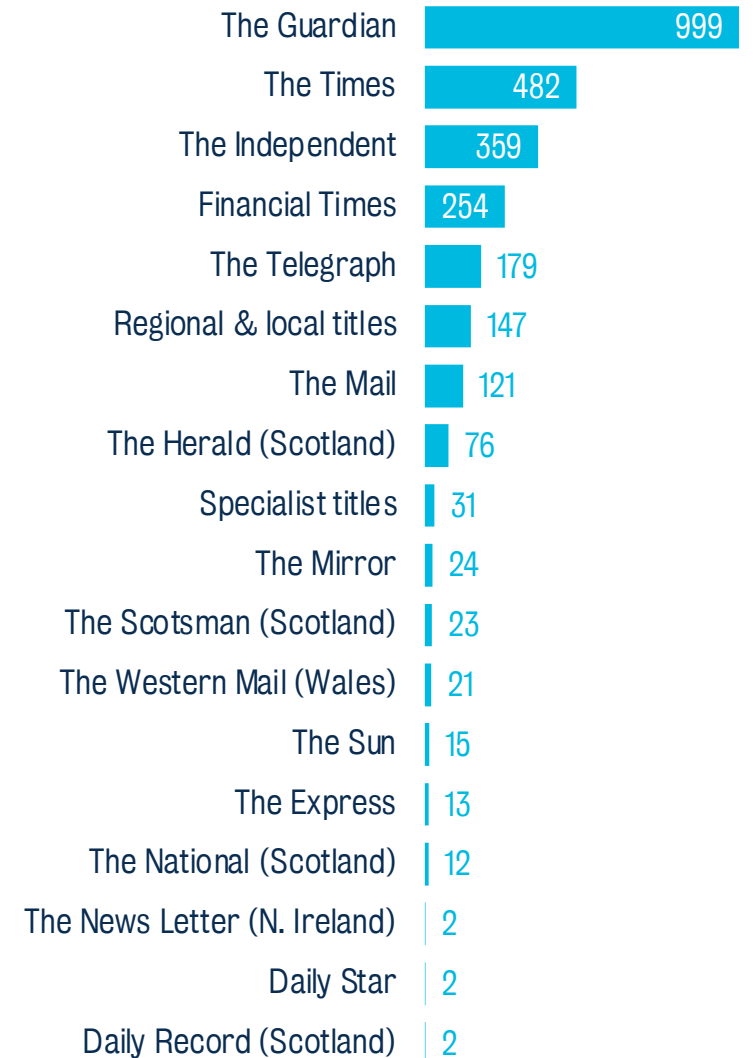
The *Guardian* comes top among all UK newspapers for mentions of “culture wars”, with the term appearing in 999 articles published between 1993 and 2020. The *Times*, which comes second for mentions of the term, used it in less than half as many (482), and the other national broadsheets – the *Independent* (359), the *FT* (254) and the *Telegraph* (179) – follow. And while the *Guardian* was an early adopter of the term in reference to the UK, the earliest mentions of culture wars are found in the *Independent* and the *Times* in the early 1990s, in reference to divisions in the US.

2020 saw the number of reports mentioning “culture wars” more than double across almost all broadsheets, but the term began to take off in the tabloids too, with the *Mail* publishing 66 articles mentioning culture wars last year, compared with just 12 in 2019. More generally, even if not referring to culture wars explicitly, many tabloids still use affective language common in culture wars reporting – for example, describing society as being “torn apart”, which has appeared thousands of times during the same timeframe in titles that haven’t adopted the culture wars term, such as the *Mirror*, the *Sun* and the *Express*.

Number of articles mentioning “culture wars” over time, by title (1993-2020)



Number of articles mentioning “culture wars”, by title (1993–2020)



Source: Nexis (n=2,762); titles grouped from Nexis metadata. Titles include Sunday editions, supplements and online (eg Times Educational Supplement, Mail Online). Regional/local and specialist titles have been grouped.

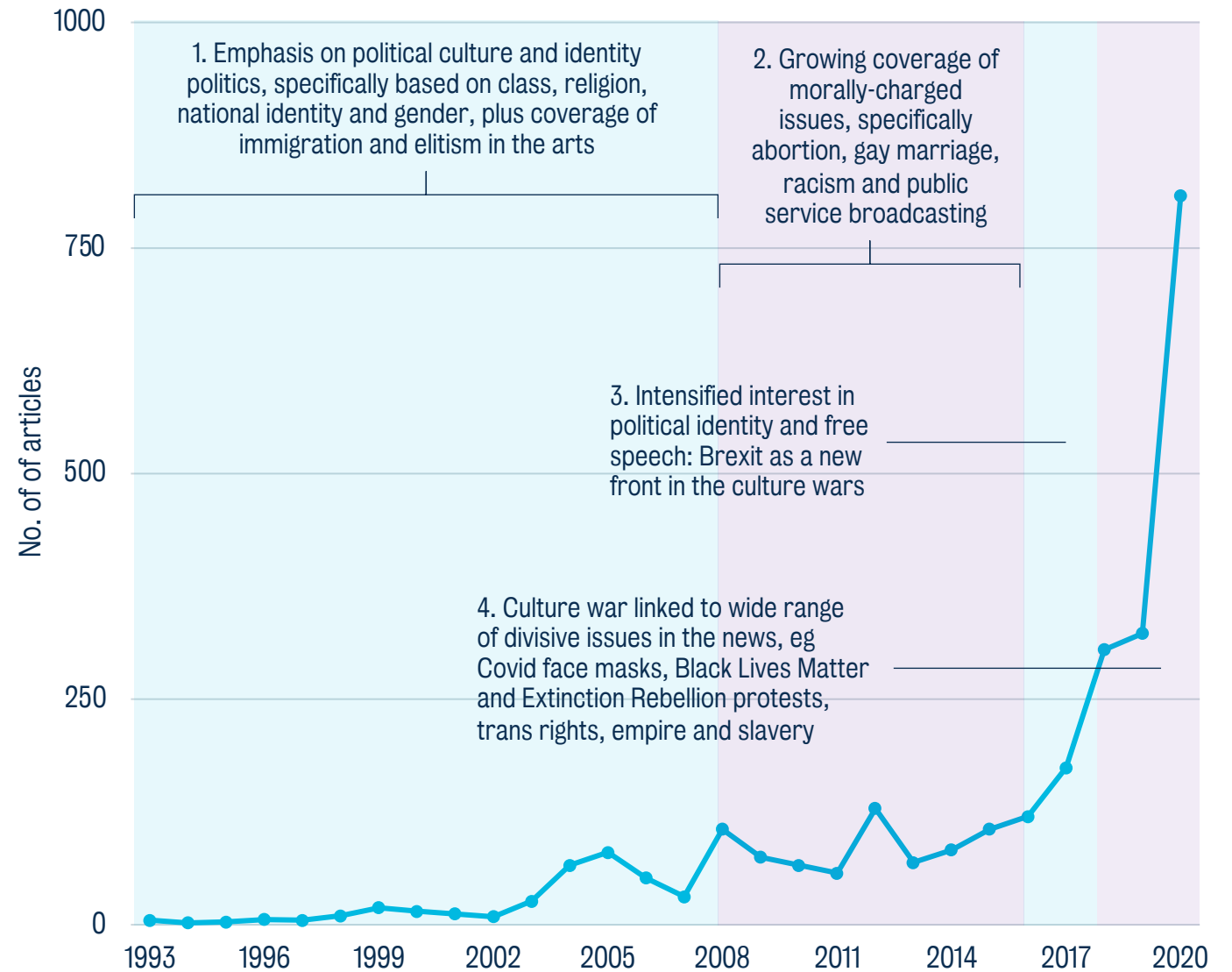
The subjects linked to culture wars in UK newspapers have broadened over time

During the 1990s and early 2000s, journalists mostly evoked the culture wars metaphor in reference to topics such as party or identity politics (particularly class, religion, national identity and gender), along with a small set of divisive topics such as immigration and elitism in the arts. But from 2008, the scope of topics associated with culture wars in the UK began to expand, with cornerstones of the US situation – abortion, gay rights and race – entering the debate.

Topics drawn into culture wars debates often mirror policy agendas. For example, articles linking gay rights to the UK culture wars peaked with the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2012 and received substantially less coverage thereafter. Focus on political divides increased sharply around the time of the EU referendum in 2016. And the recent spike in coverage of trans rights emerged as reforms to the Gender Recognition Act 2004 were being considered by government.

But since 2018, the language of “culture wars” has been a magnet for a wide range of issues: from views on lockdown to the removal of statues, from wearing a poppy or singing Rule Britannia to going vegan, any divisive topic is quickly dubbed a new “fault line” in the culture wars.

Expansion of issues associated with the UK’s culture wars in UK newspapers (1993–2020)



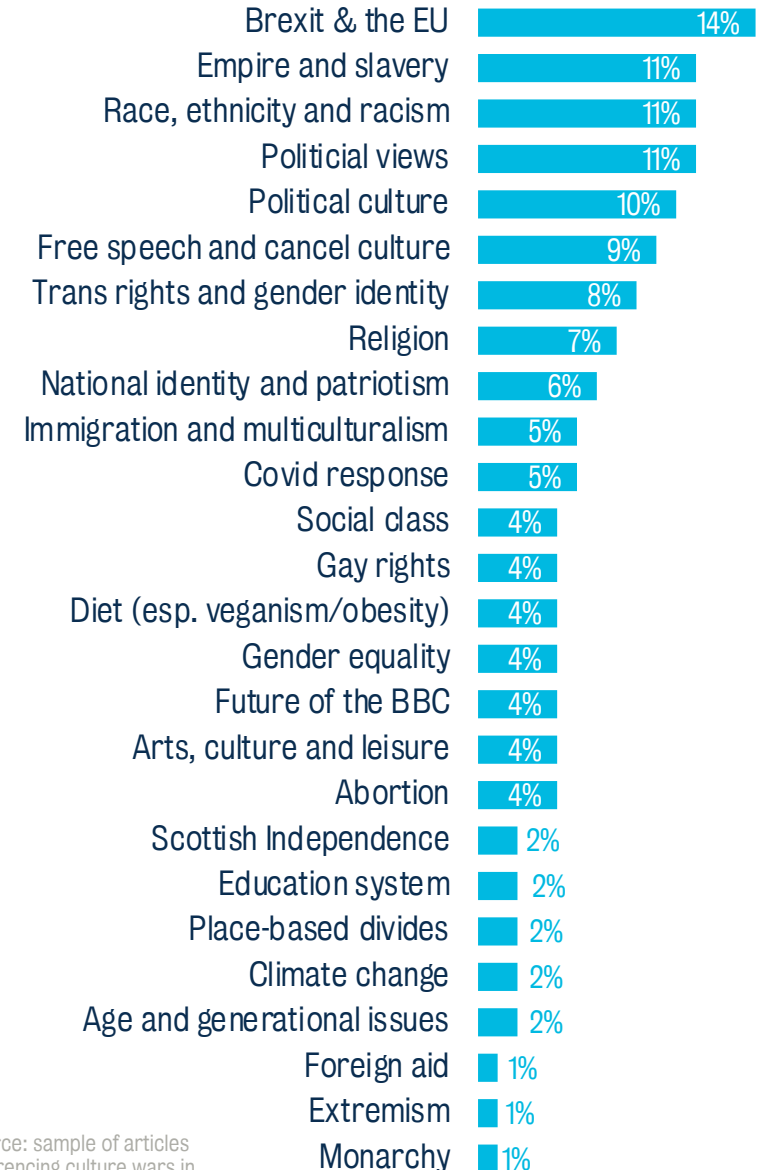
Source: Nexis (n=2,762). Labels generated from manual coding of 322 articles focused on the UK.

The issues that the UK media associate with culture wars

A wide range of issues have been drawn into the debate on culture wars in the UK. Based on close analysis of a quarter of all articles mentioning culture wars in the UK, we found:

- **Brexit and the EU** featured in roughly one in seven (14%) articles and almost half of those published in 2016, going on to receive double the amount of coverage as traditional party-political identities until 2019, when attention given to both started to diminish. Yet **political views** (particularly tensions between Labour and Conservative supporters) have been a staple of culture wars coverage, featuring in around one in nine (11%) reports.
- Other issues have clear triggering events – for example, the recent emphasis on **empire and slavery** (11%) and **race, ethnicity and racism** (11%), is often explicitly linked to the Black Lives Matter movement. Similarly, culture war debates about **trans rights and gender identity** (8%) peaked in 2019, around the time of consultations on reforms to the Gender Recognition Act, as did debates around restricting personal liberties in the government’s **coronavirus response** (5%) in 2020.
- There is also a notable focus on institutions. This is dominated by coverage of **political culture** (10%) – particularly politicians engaging in more adversarial political behaviour, identity politics or losing touch with the electorate – as well as issues around **free speech and cancel culture** (9%), which has largely centred around the no-platforming of speakers in universities and censorship in the media. The **future of the BBC** (4%) and **arts, culture and leisure** (4%) also have a recurring presence in culture war debates since the mid-2000s, with a focus on bias, elitism and trustworthiness.
- Some of the cornerstones of culture wars in the US, such as **abortion** (4%) and **climate change** (2%), attract less attention the UK – although there is slightly more focus on **religion** (7%), **national identity/patriotism** (6%) and **immigration/multiculturalism** (5%).

Issues associated with “culture wars” in UK media coverage, 1997–2020 (referenced in % of articles reviewed)



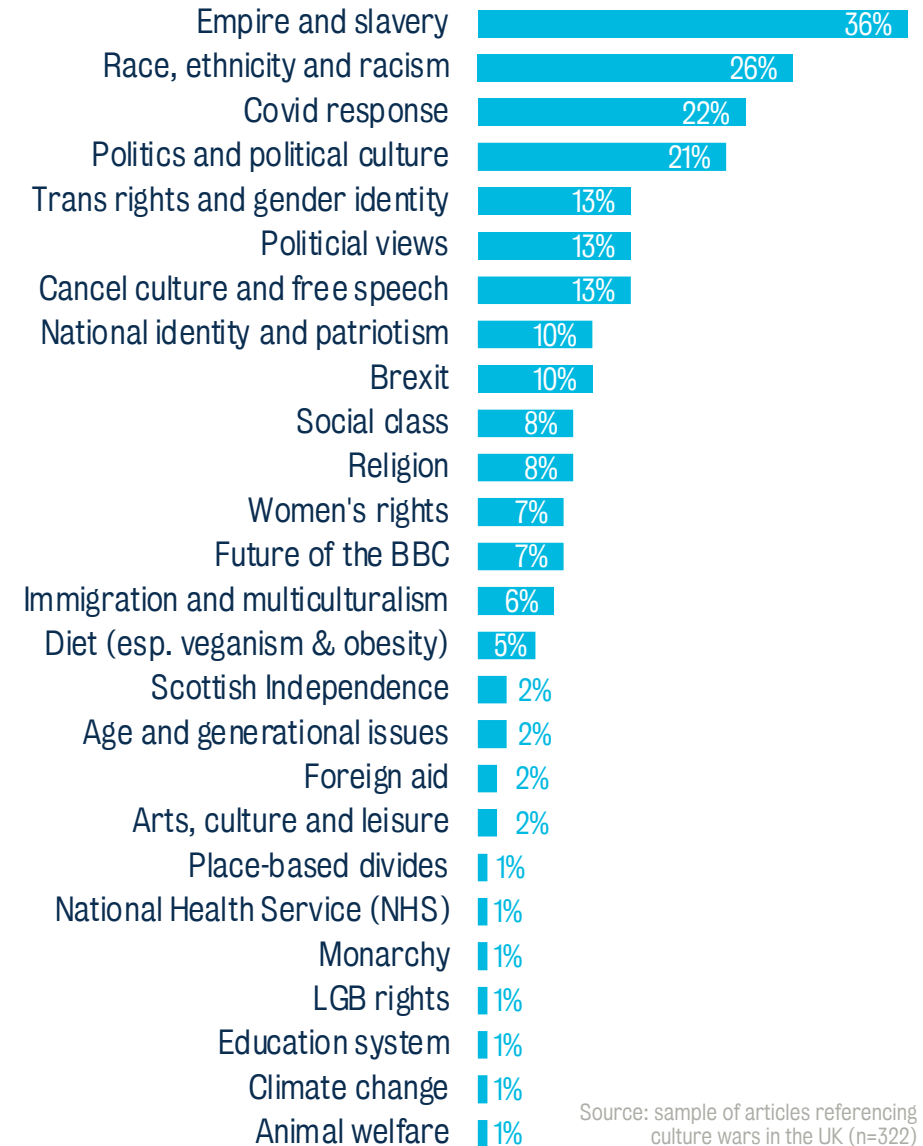
Source: sample of articles referencing culture wars in the UK (n=322)

The British empire and slavery were the issues most commonly linked to culture wars by the UK media in 2020

2020 saw a number of topics that received extensive coverage as culture war issues, with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and Covid restrictions as important triggering events. Subjects that dominated coverage include:

- **Empire and slavery** – mostly in reference to the removal of statues during or prompted by BLM protests, though with several articles engaging in a broader discussion about the representation of British history, particularly the country’s colonial past and links to the slave trade.
- **Race, ethnicity and racism** – largely linked to issues raised by the BLM protests in the UK, yet articles appeared independently on racist language, structural racism and cultural appropriation.
- **Covid** – dividing lines were primarily drawn around the public response to policies put in place by the government, such as lockdown (prompting widespread discussion on lockdown sceptics vs supporters) and mandating the wearing of face masks, as well as the breakdown of friendships over (non-)compliance with rules.
- **Politics** – triggering events are again linked to the government’s response to the pandemic, particularly reports of Covid rules being breached by senior officials, as well as the departure of Dominic Cummings from Downing Street. Many articles also highlighted politicians’ engagement in identity politics and combative political tactics, including the use of culture wars as a tactic for political gain.
- **Trans rights** – this continues to be an important narrative in culture wars since 2019, following consultation on reforms to the Gender Recognition Act 2004, but with a wide-ranging discussion around gender recognition, intolerance, debates around sex vs gender, misgendering and pronouns.

Issues associated with “culture wars” in UK media coverage in 2020 (referenced in % of articles reviewed)



Source: sample of articles referencing culture wars in the UK (n=322)

What makes an issue a “culture wars” issue?

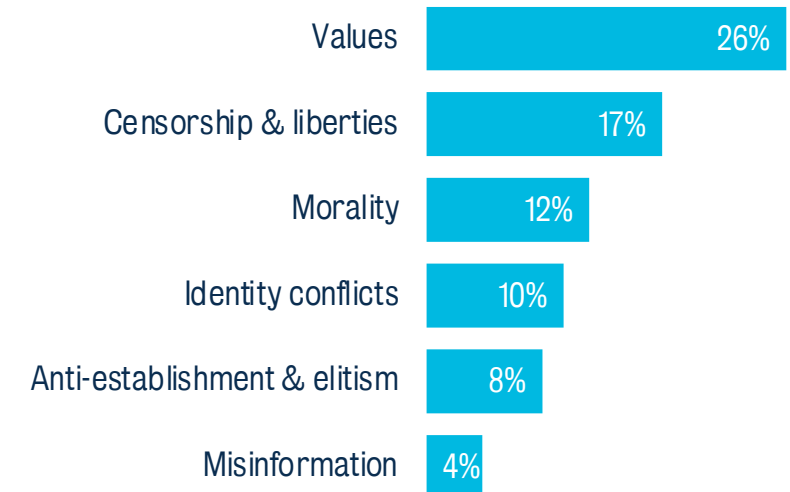
The connecting threads between articles evoking the term “culture wars” in the UK are less clear than in the US. Rather than consolidating around political identities, as has happened in the US, there are six connecting themes across the wide range of issues discussed in UK newspapers:

- **Values** are discussed in a range of ways, cutting across most topics – often through the lens of socially liberal vs socially conservative, left-wing vs right-wing economic values, or traditionalists vs progressives.
- **Censorship and liberties** such as inhibition of free speech, political correctness or censorship of cultural heritage tends to be linked to issues such as cancel culture in universities, the government’s Covid response and the arts.
- **Morality** and changing moral standards, particularly relating to intolerance, tend to be evoked more around identity politics, such as in articles on racism or trans rights, or issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage.
- **Identity conflicts** – from party and Brexit identity, to class, religion, gender and national identity – are most often associated with politics, but also appear in articles on race, national identity and immigration, as well as topics such as diet and the monarchy.
- **Anti-establishment and elitism** frames appear most often in articles on politics, where elites are seen to be driving resentment in the population overall. Some authors focus specifically on the role of populism, or antagonism between “metropolitan elites” and ordinary people.
- **Misinformation** is the overriding theme in many articles that seek to rebut culture wars claims, including the spreading of misinformation and exaggerated claims for political gain, or difficulties in discerning trustworthy sources.

“The Culture War today is deeply personal, it is about how we live our lives and our rights as individuals, which is why it is so rancorous. It is no longer about left versus right. It is difficult to pinpoint quite what it is about – authoritarianism versus liberalism, maybe, according to a liberal friend of mine. Or perhaps moral relativism versus moral absolutism. But it is also old versus young, urban versus rural, London versus the rest, tradition versus modernity, secular versus religious, and in some inchoate manner, self-defined victim versus person accused of being the oppressor ... Whatever, the Culture War is visceral: it is about who we are.”

– Rod Liddle (2018), the *Times*

Connecting themes across issues (% of articles reviewed, 1997–2020)



Culture wars in the UK

A group of six people standing in a line against a plain wall. Each person is holding a large, colorful speech bubble cutout in front of their face, completely obscuring it. The speech bubbles are in various colors: purple, yellow, green, blue, pink, and teal. The people are dressed in casual clothing like t-shirts, blouses, and jackets. The overall scene is dimly lit, with a blueish tint.

Awareness of “culture wars”

and understanding of key concepts

Majorities say they have at least a little awareness of some key concepts in the culture wars debate – but when it comes to others, most people know very little or nothing about them

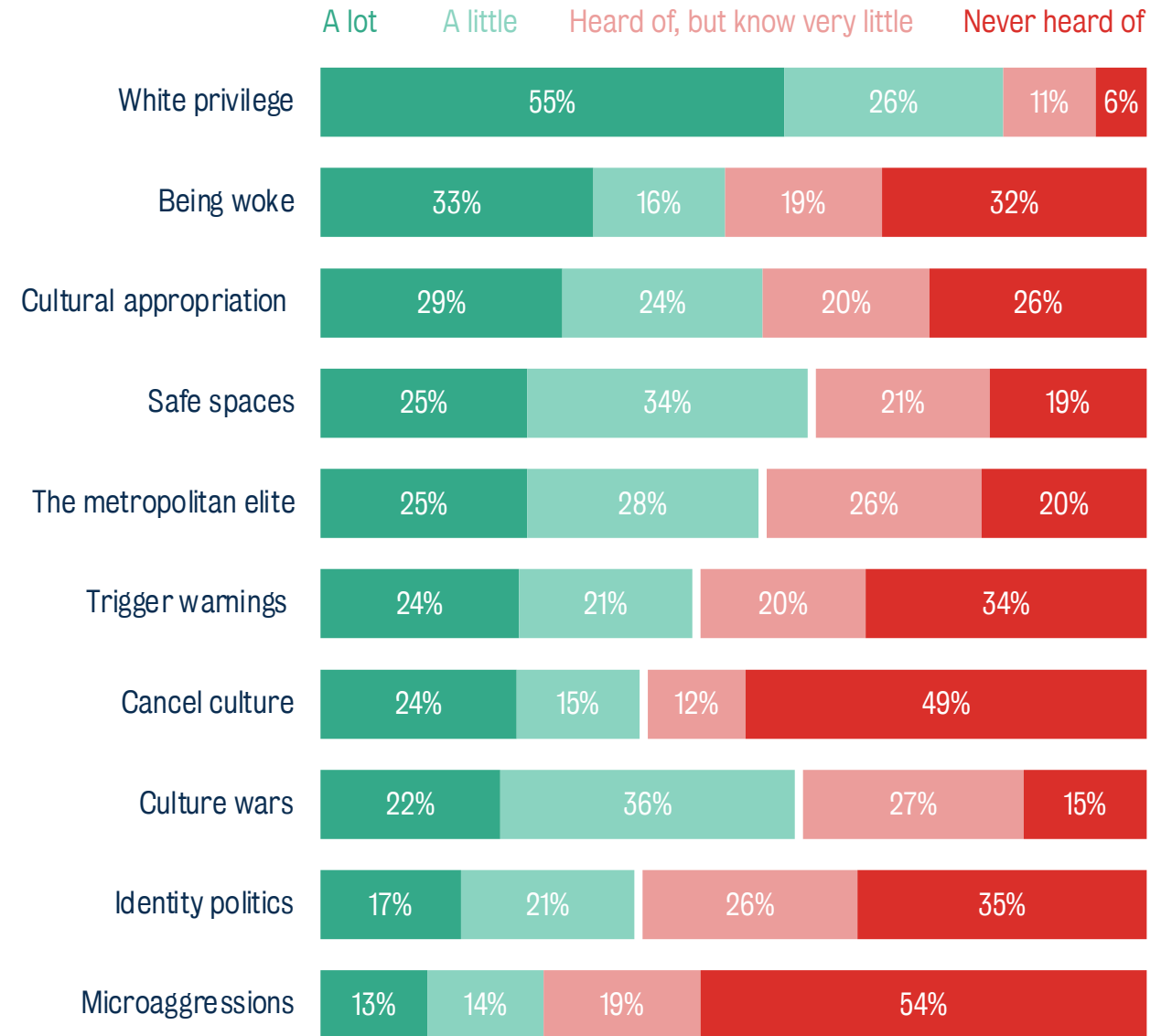
82% of the public say they've heard at least a little about white privilege, including 55% who say they've heard a lot about it – by far the most widely known concept of those asked about.

And while majorities say they are relatively aware of culture wars (58%), safe spaces (59%), cultural appropriation (53%) and the metropolitan elite (53%), notable minorities are not.

When it comes to other terms, most people have either heard of them but know very little or have never heard of them at all. For example, 72% report hearing little to nothing about microaggressions, while 61% say the same about both cancel culture and identity politics.

There is also a virtually even split in awareness of the concept of being woke – 49% say they've heard a lot or little about it, while 50% say they haven't, including 32% who have never heard of the term.

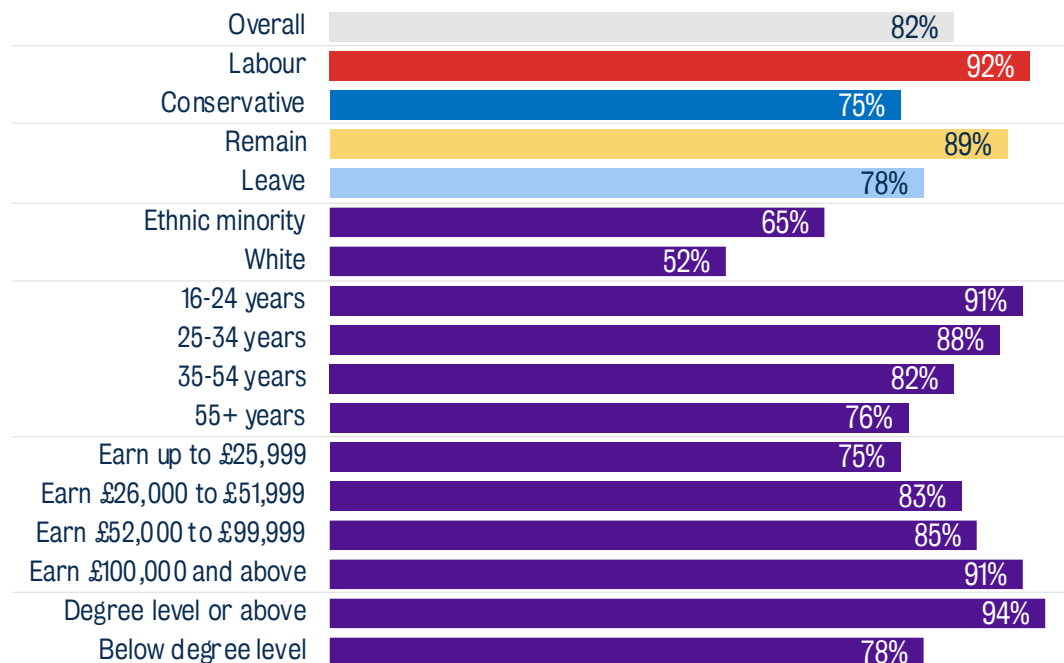
How much, if anything, have you heard or read about the following terms or phrases?



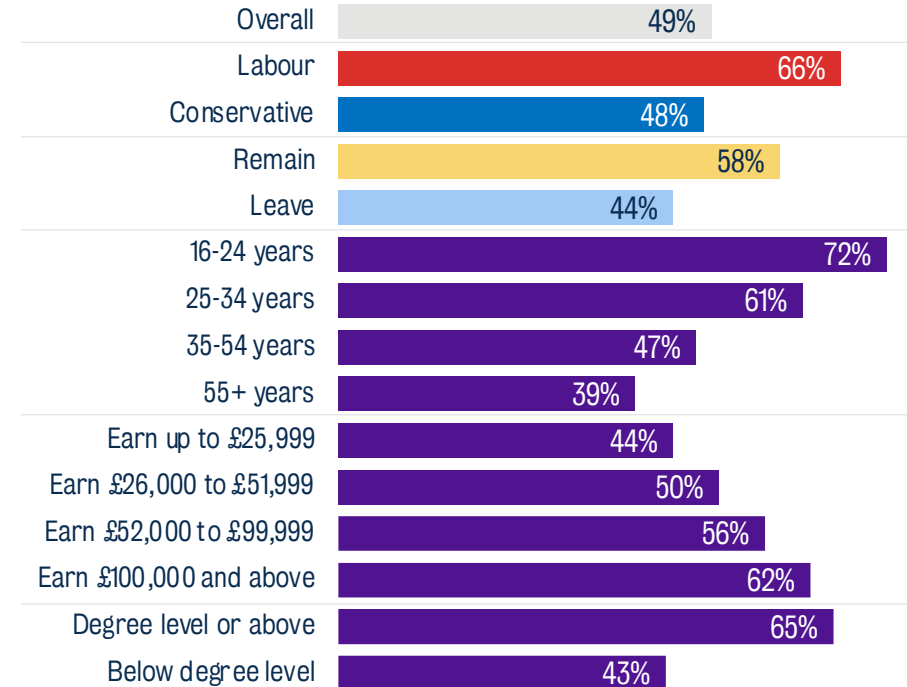
Whether people are aware of key culture wars terms varies a lot by age, politics, education and income level

Nine in 10 Labour supporters say they've heard a lot or a little about the concept of white privilege, compared with three-quarters of Conservatives who say the same. There is a similar divide between Remainers and Leavers, as well as a difference in awareness between ethnic minorities (65%) and white people (52%). And although awareness varies by age, income and education – especially in the proportion who say they have heard a lot about white privilege – the vast majority in each category say they know about the concept.

Have read / heard a lot or a little about “white privilege”



Have read / heard a lot or a little about “being woke”



Awareness of the concept of being woke declines with age: 72% of 16- to 24-year-olds have heard a lot or a little about the term, falling to 39% among those aged 55+.

Higher earners and those with university degrees are also much more likely to say they've come across the concept, as are Labour and Remain supporters.

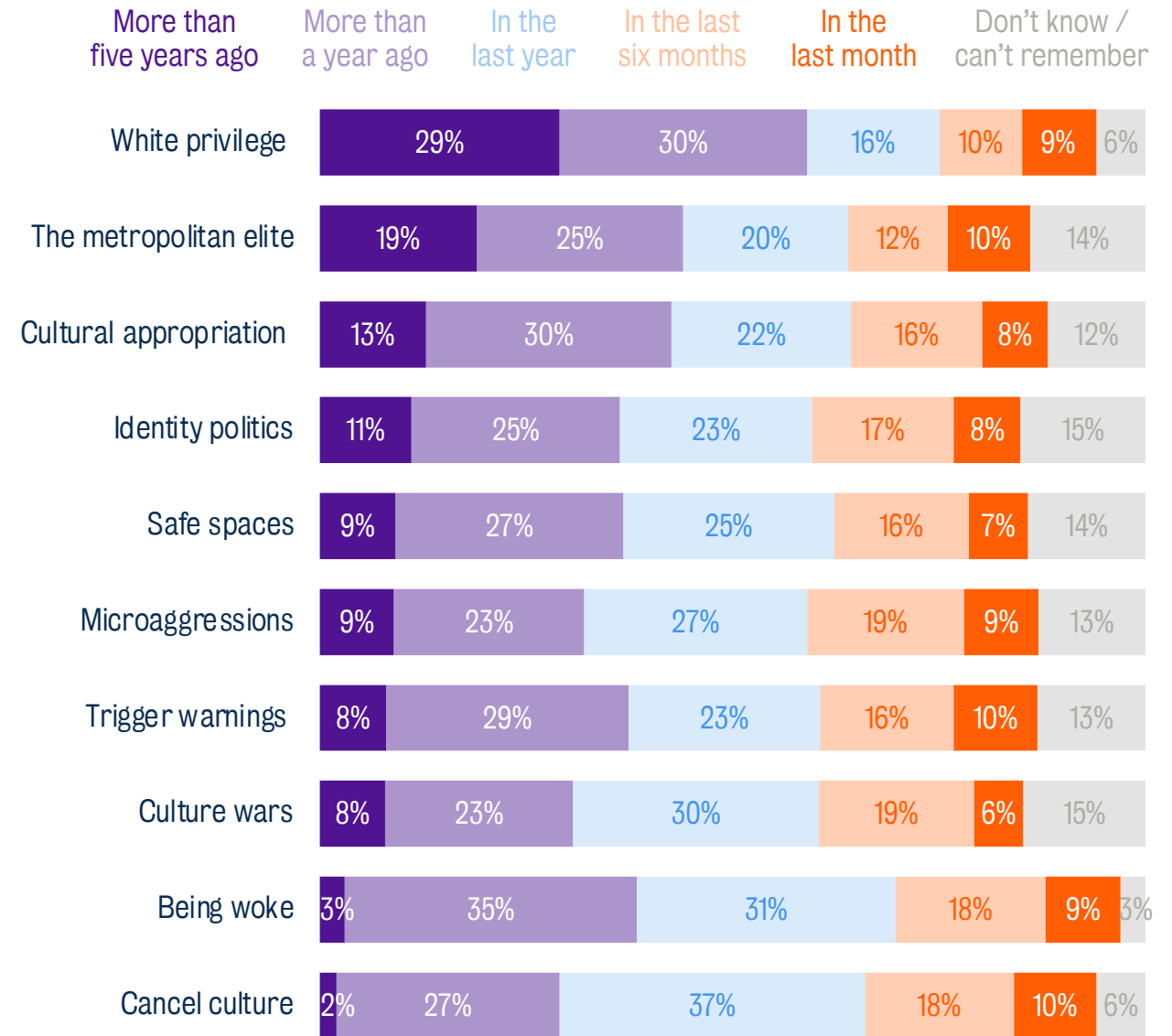
Many key culture wars terms only entered the public's consciousness within the last year

In keeping with it being the most widely recognised term, 59% of those who'd heard of "white privilege" say they first came across the concept a year or more ago – but other terms have less of a history among the public.

For example, 58% of those who've heard of being woke say they first heard or read about it at some point within the last year, compared with 38% who say it was more than a year ago at least. A majority (55%) also say the concept of culture wars was something they first came across in the last year or even more recently.

Cancel culture is the newest term as far as the public are concerned, with 65% of those aware of the term saying they first heard or read about it at some point within the last year.

When did you first hear or read about this term or phrase?



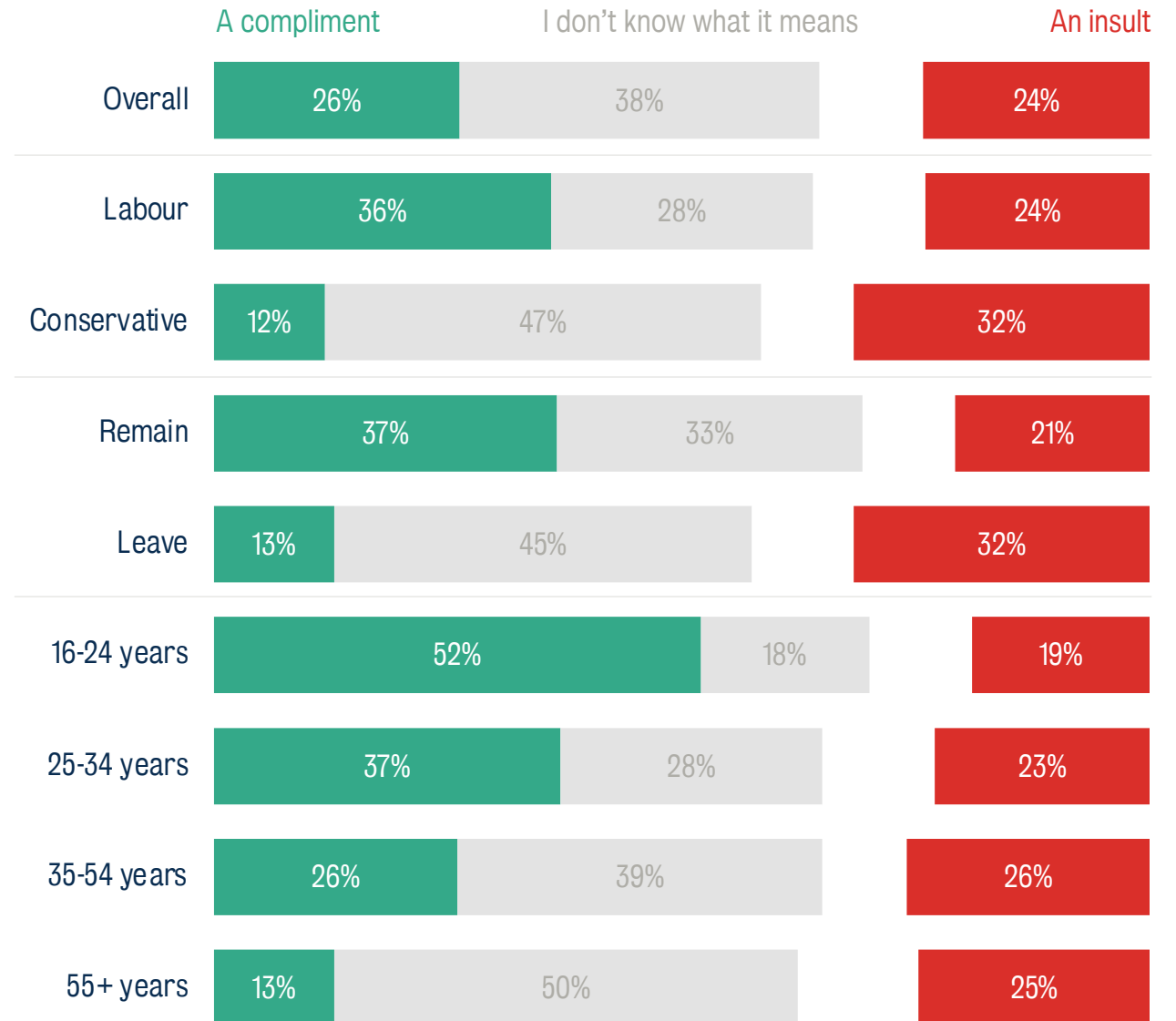
People are divided on whether being woke is a compliment or insult – but Labour supporters, Remainers and young people are much more likely to think the term has positive connotations

A quarter (26%) of the public would consider it a compliment if someone called them woke, while another quarter (24%) would see it as an insult – the most common response, however, is that people don't know what being woke means (38%).

But there are big differences in views between groups: Labour supporters (36%) are three times as likely as Conservatives (12%) to view being woke as a positive, and Remainers (37%) are around three times as likely as Leavers (13%) to say the same.

The likelihood of considering being woke a compliment also declines sharply with age: 52% of 16- to 24-year-olds say the term would have positive connotations for them, which declines to 13% among those aged 55 and above, half of whom also say they don't know what being woke means.

If someone described you as “woke” would you consider it...



The public have a limited understanding of what the term “culture wars” refers to

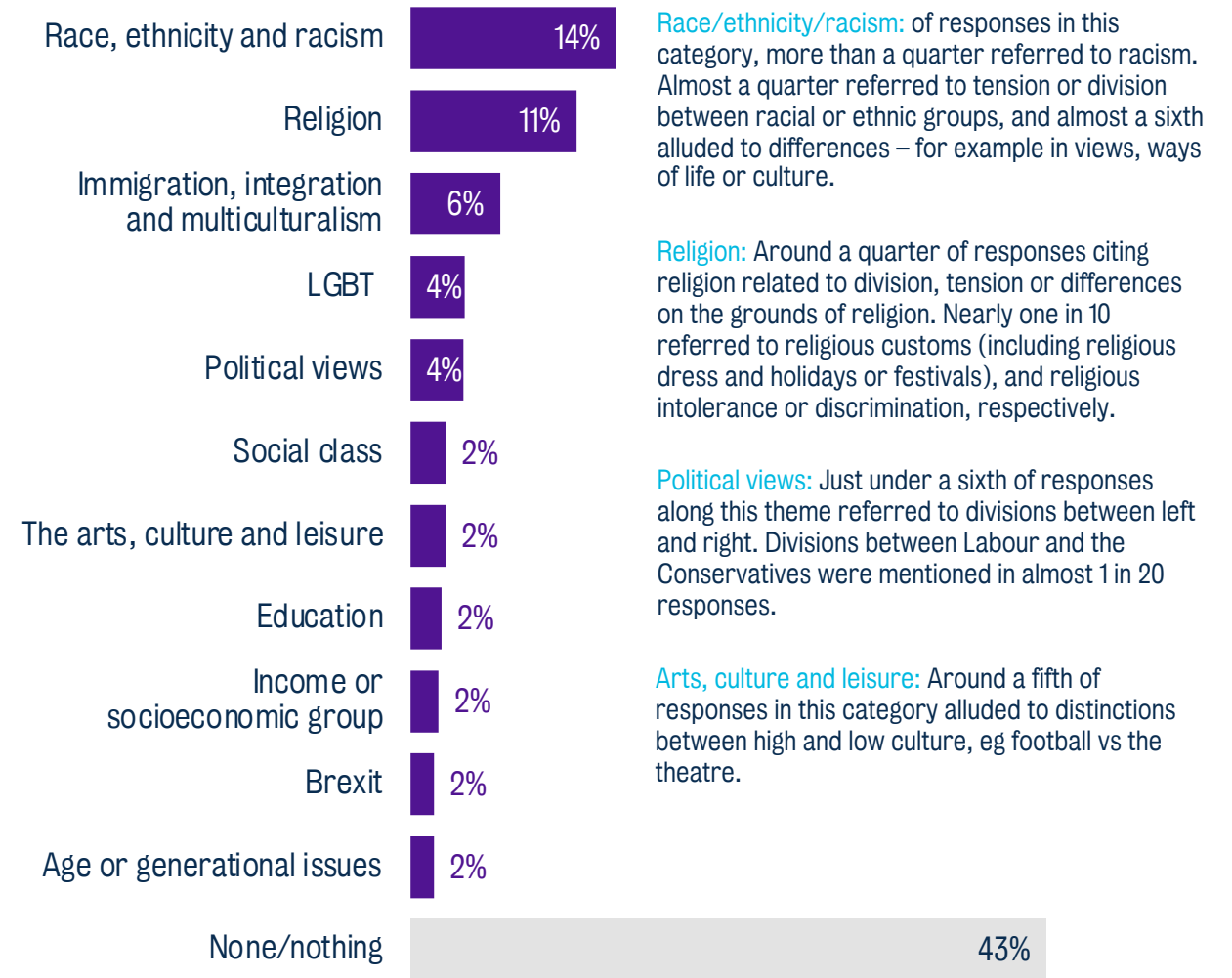
When asked to describe, in their own words, what issues the term “culture wars” makes them think of, the public’s most common response is none or nothing: for 43% of people, the term brings no particular issues to mind, indicating that the public have relatively little familiarity with the concept.

Where people do associate the term with specific issues, these tend to be around group identities on the basis of race or ethnicity, religion, nationality, politics, class or sexuality.

In particular, the high frequency of references to religion is perhaps surprising, in light of this not being a top focus in media coverage of culture wars.

Many responses simply offered general words or phrases, suggesting the lack of a clear understanding of the term.

What sorts of issues do you think of when we say “culture wars”?* ** (Responses coded according to topics mentioned)



* Top 12 issues shown, by % of responses mentioning the issue

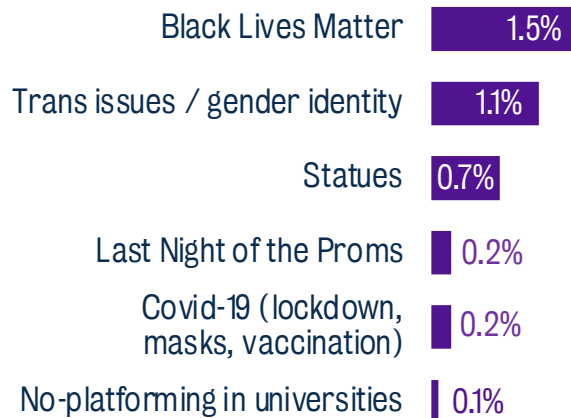
**Option of free text response (and therefore for respondents to identify multiple issues), or option of none/nothing

High-profile media topics are rarely recalled by the public when they think of culture wars

Apart from race and ethnicity, only tiny minorities of people associate the term “culture wars” with the sorts of issues that have been prominent in the media’s coverage of culture wars. Less than 1% of people offered responses related to the Last Night of the Proms, university no-platforming and statues, for example, while only marginally more people cited the Black Lives Matter movement and trans or gender identity issues.

Despite Covid-19 dominating the news cycle, issues related to mask wearing, obeying lockdown restrictions and vaccination are seen by vanishingly few members of the public as a site of culture wars.

What sorts of issues do you think of when we say “culture wars”?*

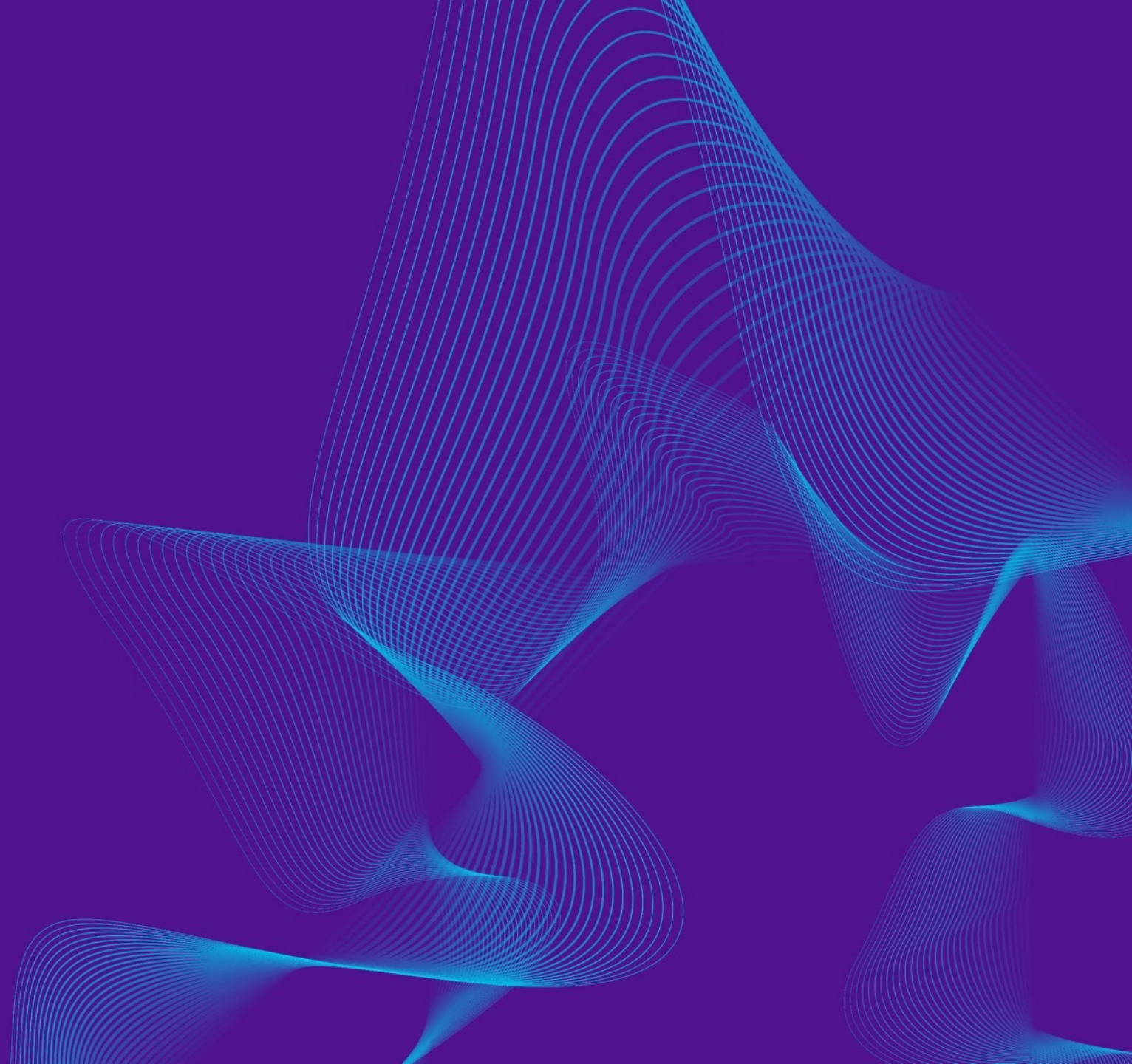


* Selected culture wars issues and terms with a high media profile shown

What sorts of issues do you think of when we say “culture wars”?
(Responses coded according to implicit or explicit themes)

| Theme | Frequency (% responses) | Ideas captured within theme |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| Tension between different groups in society with different identities | 18% | Tension or conflict between different groups in society (eg based on culture, religion, age, ethnicity, nationality, etc), or one group versus another. |
| Values | 10% | Values, beliefs, morality, the tension between tradition and progressivism. |
| Competition between cultures | 3% | Competition or rivalry, the struggle for dominance between cultures, one group seeking to force its views on others, threat to “British culture”. |
| Way of life | 3% | Different ways of life, backgrounds and upbringings. |
| Intolerance, discrimination against other cultures | 3% | Intolerance, a lack of respect for or a refusal to accept other cultures or ways of life. |
| Culture wars as manufactured or exaggerated | 1% | Exaggeration by the media, politicians stoking culture wars as a political tactic. |

Technical note



Technical note: media content analysis

The sample was drawn from the Nexis database of UK national and regional newspapers, through a search for the term “culture wars” with a cut off date of 31 December 2020. The original search returned 3,836 articles. After cleaning (ie removing duplicates and false positives), this left a sample of **2,762 articles**.

The full sample was tagged manually in Excel for geography. Where possible, the country of focus was identified from the headline. Where this was not possible (821 articles), the full text was skim read to determine location.

Number of articles included in analysis, by publication year

| Year | Total no. articles | No. UK-focused | Included in coding | Year | Total no. articles | No. UK-focused | Included in coding |
|------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| 1993 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 2007 | 31 | 13 | 3 |
| 1994 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2008 | 106 | 32 | 8 |
| 1995 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2009 | 75 | 8 | 2 |
| 1996 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 2010 | 66 | 19 | 5 |
| 1997 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 2011 | 57 | 21 | 5 |
| 1998 | 10 | 2 | 1 | 2012 | 129 | 48 | 12 |
| 1999 | 19 | 9 | 2 | 2013 | 69 | 29 | 7 |
| 2000 | 15 | 5 | 1 | 2014 | 83 | 46 | 11 |
| 2001 | 12 | 5 | 1 | 2015 | 106 | 21 | 5 |
| 2002 | 9 | 1 | 0 | 2016 | 120 | 49 | 12 |
| 2003 | 26 | 8 | 2 | 2017 | 174 | 67 | 17 |
| 2004 | 66 | 11 | 3 | 2018 | 305 | 137 | 34 |
| 2005 | 80 | 27 | 6 | 2019 | 323 | 178 | 45 |
| 2006 | 52 | 14 | 4 | 2020 | 808 | 534 | 134 |

Coding in NVivo

A sample of 25% of articles that observe culture wars in the UK were read in full and analysed in NVivo to identify more precisely the topics, protagonists and framing of culture wars in the discussion about culture wars in the media.

Coding was conducted by four researchers. Consistency of coding was checked by one reviewer, who reviewed a third of the articles analysed to check for consistency. The codeframe was developed iteratively through four rounds of review, following a grounded theory process. The final code-frame captured:

- **Culture wars framing** –the position of the term in the article (eg if it frames the entire argument or alluded to) as well as descriptive language used
- **Support for the culture wars thesis** – the author’s position on the existence of culture wars in the UK and temporality of their existence, if specified
- **Geographies** – references to specific regions of the UK or other countries
- **Topic** – the issues linked to the culture wars debate, sites where they are observed and bridging themes
- **Protagonists** – the people or organisations that the author describes as being involved in the culture war and their role

Inclusion/exclusion criteria for coding

| | Include | Exclude |
|-----------|--|---|
| Geography | Includes direct or implicit reference to UK (or areas within the UK). Articles that cover more than one country can be included, but UK must be included as a reference point. | Articles which do not reference the UK |
| Topic | Any reference to culture wars, even if tangential/headline only | Articles which do not reference to culture wars, or refer to publications or media with culture wars in the title, but don't engage with topic itself |

Technical note: survey

Ipsos MORI interviewed online a representative sample of 2,834 adults aged 16+ across the United Kingdom between 26th November and 2nd December 2020. This data has been collected by Ipsos MORI's UK KnowledgePanel, an online random probability panel which provides gold standard insights into the UK population, by providing bigger sample sizes via the most rigorous research methods. Data are weighted by age, gender, region, Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile, education, ethnicity and number of adults in the household in order to reflect the profile of the UK population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.

Ipsos MORI's UK KnowledgePanel is the UK's largest online random probability panel, providing total understanding of the UK public for businesses and organisations looking for cutting edge insight at the gold standard of online research methods. It is important because it includes both online and offline participants selected at random from every address in the UK, the first of its kind, with a single interface to eliminate modal effects and produce accurate data rapidly.

UK KnowledgePanel utilises a panel of 15,000+ participants to provide a new innovative tool for all those organisations who wish to garner greater insights into the behaviours, beliefs and attitudes of not just the UK population as a whole, but also into the specific communities which make up the UK's diverse population.

Studies completed on UK KnowledgePanel will be fully representative of the UK population including the 4% of households who are considered 'offline'. This is made possible by recruiting offline and supplying participants with a tablet, internet access and the tech support needed to get online. As a result of this approach the panel utilises a single online data collection method, with no differential mode effects – a pioneering advancement which enhances the ability to understand our society.

The UK KnowledgePanel builds on work done by Ipsos in the US on their own, which has been operating since 1999, utilising that experience and blending it with Ipsos MORI's own research and methodological expertise to produce a tool which delivers robust nationally representative data at speed. [Find out more.](#)

This study was supported by Unbound Philanthropy

Subgroups

| Variable | Survey (Nov-Dec 20) | Variable | Survey (Nov-Dec 20) |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Gender | | Party support | |
| Male | 1,386 | Conservative | 806 |
| Female | 1,439 | Labour | 669 |
| Age | | Brexit support | |
| 16-24 | 145 | Leave | 860 |
| 25-34 | 322 | Remain | 1750 |
| 35-54 | 973 | Income level | |
| 55+ | 1,394 | Up to £25,999 | 612 |
| Ethnicity | | £26,000 to £51,999 | 934 |
| White | 2,644 | £52,000 to £99,999 | 616 |
| Ethnic minority | 164 | £100,000 and above | 212 |
| Country | | Occupation type | |
| England | 2,124 | Modern professional | 924 |
| Scotland | 443 | Clerical and intermediate | 397 |
| Wales | 109 | Senior manager/admin. | 415 |
| Northern Ireland | 158 | Technical and craft | 158 |
| Region | | Semiroutine manual/serv. | 189 |
| North East | 107 | Routine manual/service | 103 |
| North West | 275 | Middle/junior managers | 223 |
| Yorkshire & Humber | 163 | Traditional professional | 343 |
| East Midlands | 205 | Education level | |
| West Midlands | 209 | Degree level or above | 1371 |
| East of England | 256 | Below degree level | 1199 |
| South East | 387 | | |
| South West | 282 | | |
| London | 240 | | |



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