

The declining Kingdom? Emotional ascription, emotional expectations, and humour in the international framing of the UK in crisis

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Abstract

In the last few years, the United Kingdom has been through much: a referendum and the subsequent departure from the European Union that ensued, the COVID-19 pandemic, the death of the monarch Queen Elizabeth II, and an ongoing cost of living crisis. This article delves into how the foreign press has framed the UK through these events. It focuses on the role of the politics of emotions by introducing the concepts of emotional ascription and emotional expectations, as well as incorporating humour in the conversation. Examining international media, the article finds two main ways the UK was discussed: pitied as a ‘broken’ and ‘depressed’ country and mocked as a ‘laughingstock’. The article argues that, to an extent, the UK’s desired self-conception as ‘Global Britain’ is subverted by these negative perceptions around the world, undermining its national image and contributing to weakening its soft power and status aspirations. Such a decline in reputation can negatively affect its ability to build and maintain strong and positive relations with ally countries. However, the article shows that the UK’s negative traits are primarily attributed to its politicians as opposed to its population or culture(s), so the country’s attractiveness does not decrease too significantly.

Keywords

emotions, Global Britain, humour in IR, international relations, United Kingdom

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Introduction

In 2021, the United Kingdom (UK) government announced its new plan for Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy post-Brexit: ‘Global Britain in a Competitive Age’. The ‘Global Britain’ plan, first mentioned as early as 2016, is a programme describing ‘the government’s vision for the UK’s role in the world over the next decade’

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(GOV.UK, 2021). It re-establishes and re-formulates the UK's international status after its departure from the European Union (EU), aiming to redefine Britain's rapport with EU member states but also with other countries like the United States (US), Commonwealth nations, and the Indo-Pacific region. Through Global Britain, the UK government is attempting to 'rebrand' the country as outward-looking and internationalist, despite Brexit being associated with an attitude of isolation (Browning, 2023). As the UK's global influence in the latter half of the 20th century was largely built on its membership to the EU, Brexit has unbalanced its place in the world (Hadfield and Whitman, 2023). The efforts to regain its international reputation have thus been a key issue of the UK's foreign policy programme.

The UK's attempts to reposition itself on the international scene come in the midst of what British politicians and media have feared to be deteriorating prestige (BBC News, 2022; Helm, 2024; The Independent, 2023). This possible decline corresponds with several crises in recent years that have cast doubts on the status of the UK as a global power. Brexit, the succession of several Prime Ministers in a short period of time (which reached its nadir when a head of lettuce outlasted Liz Truss), the (mis)management of the Covid pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis have raised eyebrows around the world regarding the stability of the UK. But how has Britain been portrayed in other countries in recent years? More importantly, what kind of consequences could stem from this decrease in reputation? These are the questions this article aims to answer.

When looking at what the international press is saying about the UK, I find two portrayals with the particular potential to undermine Britain's image. First, the UK is presented through the prism of negative emotionalisation as a 'broken' and 'depressed' country. Second, the UK is depicted as a 'laughing stock' and made fun of through the use of humour, especially mockery. This has some important political repercussions and leads to several reflections. The negative portrayal of Britain in the foreign press is likely to worsen its reputation, making the country less attractive for business and tourism and decreasing its chances of regaining status on the international scene. Negative perceptions around the world, therefore, subvert the UK's desired self-conception as 'Global Britain', possibly undermining its soft power and status aspirations and negatively affecting its ability to build and maintain strong and positive relations with countries in and outside of the EU. The use of humour in the international press, similarly, undermines the UK's reputation and tarnishes perceptions of it as it contributes to humiliating it and putting it in an unfavourable position.

The article thus makes an empirical contribution by assessing the international perception of Britain in the wake of Brexit and the Global Britain ambitions, investigating the disjuncture between the rhetorical ambitions of Global Britain and the emotionally charged international responses it has elicited. Theoretically, it also contributes to the literature on emotion research in IR by building on the literature on the politics of emotions to introduce the concepts of emotional expectations and emotional ascription. The article also adds to the growing scholarship on humour in IR by discussing the role of humour in the politics of emotions, notably through assessing how mocking ascribed emotions can be used to undermine a country's national image. Despite the growing interest in emotions and humour in international politics, few studies have examined how emotional portrayals by foreign media, particularly from close allies, can undermine a state's self-narration and status claims. Even fewer have explored how humour operates as a vehicle for emotional ascription and expectation, shaping national images through ridicule and mockery. This article addresses this gap by offering a conceptual synthesis of

emotional politics and humour, applied to the case of Britain post-Brexit. In doing so, it introduces the novel concepts of emotional ascription and emotional expectation, demonstrating how these framings work through humour to challenge the credibility of the UK's self-image. This has broader implications for how states' emotional reputations affect their soft power and international standing in times of crisis.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, it reviews the literature on national image and how a less desirable one can harm a country's influence. Second, it develops the theoretical framework based on the politics of emotions and humour that will be employed to analyse the data. Third, it introduces new categories of politics of emotions, emotional ascription and emotional expectations and explains how it can be allied with humour to (intentionally or not) humiliate an actor. Fourth, it gives a broad overview of some of the ways the UK is portrayed in four ally countries, Australia, France, Germany, and the US. These cases were selected due to their geopolitical relevance as allies and frequent targets of British public diplomacy, and the empirical material includes long-form journalistic pieces and prominent headlines collected through LexisNexis, analysed using an Emotion Discourse Analysis framework (Koschut, 2018; see also Houde, 2023, 2024) to identify patterns of emotional ascription, expectation, and mockery. This methodological approach enables a close reading of how affective framings circulate internationally and interact with Britain's Global Britain narrative. The article concludes by reflecting on how these representations ascribe emotional meanings to the UK and set expectations for its international behaviour, casting doubt on the credibility of the *Global Britain* project and revealing the affective challenges of post-Brexit identity-making on the world stage.

National image and soft power

At its core, Global Britain seeks to reassert the UK's relevance and influence on the world stage post-Brexit, positioning the country as outward-looking, confident, and cooperative. However, when the UK is repeatedly portrayed abroad through narratives of decline, dysfunction, or ridicule, these framings can undercut the project's ambitions. The constructivist literature on identity has established that recognition and status are important for states and their populations (Adler-Nissen, 2014); this includes working towards maintaining a positive national image. A national image is defined broadly as a complex and contradictory phenomenon that refers to 'the mental pictures that spring to mind when people are prompted to think of a country or its people' (Browning, 2023: 12) but also to a more extensive set of considerations such as 'the reputation that a country trades on in the international marketplace' or 'the raw material from which jokes and satire are formed' (Saunders, 2020: 13). National images can thus stem from diverse factors such as stereotypes, cuisine, symbols like flags, art, landscapes, lifestyles, characters (real and imaginary), and many more signifiers that can come to represent the nation (Jourdan, 2007). They vary depending on context and can be positive or negative; it is 'a socially constructed view of a nation, and it exists on both the domestic and foreign levels' (Saunders, 2020: 13). National images are also fluid and can change over time; the national image of Germany in other countries is, for instance, strikingly different today than it was during the 1940's.

A favourable national image is crucial for several reasons. First, it shapes how a country is seen both by others and its own population: 'A national image is not just for external consumption, as it can be used to infuse a nation with a sense of pride that helps unite it. Promoting a positive

national image can help generate a sense of solidarity with others' (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2003: 196).¹

Conversely, a negative image can be detrimental to a population's sense of ontological security, or security-of-being, as it can cast doubt on questions about who we are and how we are being (mis)recognised (Browning, 2023).

Second, national image influences a state's position on the international stage. From the Other's perspective, a positive image can foster higher trust, feelings of friendship, and thus more possibilities for trade deals and cooperation (see Berenskoetter and van Hoef, 2017 on friendship in International Relations). In contrast, a negative image can lead to animosity, having behaviours and intentions misread or misinterpreted, and thus a lesser status on the international scene (McDermott, 2010). A country's attractiveness, shaped by its national image, also influences a state's soft power, or its ability to persuade others and exercise influence on the international stage (Nye, 2009). Thus, a state has good reason to be preoccupied with its national image, given the geopolitical and diplomatic consequences.

Third, national images also evolve in a globalised capitalist world where states try to maximise their economic gains (Browning, 2023). According to nation branding consultant Simon Anholt (2020), cultivating an image as 'doing good',² for instance, can attract tourism and investments and ultimately be good for business. National images and reputation, therefore, impact not only relationships with other states in a political way but also in an economic one. In sum, 'in a globalised world, the fundamental responsibility of any government must be to protect and pass on the nation's image and reputation intact, preferably enhanced' (Browning, 2023: 43).

Importantly, however, national images are never uniform or passively received. As scholars of public diplomacy have long emphasised, national images emerge through a complex interplay between external representations, internal identities, and the perceptions of diverse audiences ranging from allies to adversaries (Cull, 2009). States project different aspects of their image to different international publics, and these audiences interpret them through their own cultural, political, and historical lenses. Moreover, national images do not operate in isolation from policy action or material power: diplomatic behaviour, military choices, and international credibility all shape how emotional and reputational narratives are received (Melissen, 2005). In this sense, national image and its emotional resonances must be understood as fluid, relational, and embedded in a broader ecology of international meaning-making (Graham, 2014). Public diplomacy must grapple not only with strategic messaging but with the emotional atmospheres that shape the receptivity of those messages. As this article shows, ridicule and sarcasm are not neutral or superficial reactions; they signal a breakdown in affective legitimacy. While national images might not be particularly emotional in themselves (Browning, 2023), I thus argue that emotions play a role in how they can change over time, or at least in how they are portrayed. This is notably done through partaking in the politics of emotions.

Humour and the politics of emotions

The theoretical framework of the article is based on two strands of literature in International Relations, which I argue are better brought into conversation when analysing discourse, especially as they can help us understand how national images are shaped internationally. The first strand is the politics of emotions, 'an attempt at capturing the *political effects of*

emotional practices' (Åhäll, 2018: 38), or how actors discursively determine who gets to or should feel a certain way, if and why it matters, and whether it is legitimate (Beattie et al., 2019; Gustafsson and Hall, 2021). Gustafsson and Hall (2021) notably speak of three types of politics of emotions: emotional obligation (the imposition of what an actor should feel or express feeling), emotional entitlement (whether this actor is allowed to feel a certain way), and emotional deference (whose emotions should be considered and prioritised when making decisions). Actors can thus emotionalise some issues by using one or more of these three strategies and justify policies or make arguments more convincing in doing so (Gellwitzki and Houde, 2024; Gellwitzki, 2025). While the politics of emotions have mainly been studied in the context of governments and political actors, they have recently been analysed in the context of media and how they contribute to pushing the politics of emotions played at the government level (Gellwitzki and Houde, 2025). This article follows the latter trend and focuses on media discourse.

The second strand of research is the flourishing field of humour in International Relations. The field has notably been concerned with how humour is used in making (or breaking) politicians' images (Braslett et al., 2021; Malmvig, 2023), how it is used in diplomacy and national image building (Braslett, 2024), and how it can be used as a means to insult or humiliate (Weaver, 2016), among others. Moreover, it shows the ambiguity of responses to humour used in political contexts (Wedderburn, 2021) and how it can be used strategically (Chernobrov, 2022). Importantly, humour is also used to build identities and in-groups and deal with misrecognition (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi, 2019; Wedderburn, 2021). One thing remains sure, though, is that 'humour and comedy have affective cultural power that can be a resource for both understanding and enacting politics' (Braslett et al., 2021: 3). Thus, a sustained conversation between humour and the politics of emotions is long overdue.

The role of humour in the politics of emotions is manifold. Building on Gustafsson and Hall (2021)'s typology, I argue that humour can serve as a tool for obligation if an actor uses humour to urge another actor to feel a certain way about an event or a decision. A joke about who gets to feel what can help shift perspectives on the matter at play and contribute to the politics of emotional entitlement. Finally, humour about deference, or which emotions are prioritised or considered, can also be a way to pass a message. Thus, strategic humour, or 'the use of humour by state and proxy actors to promote instrumental interpretations of contested international events to domestic and foreign audiences' (Chernobrov, 2022: 278), can be particularly fruitful to the efficiency of politics of emotions attempts. I argue that humour, particularly mockery, can function as a mechanism through which the politics of emotions, notably of *emotional ascription* and *emotional expectations*, are negotiated and weaponised. In doing so, it becomes crucial to national images and how other countries construct discourses about a nation, especially in the case of the Global Britain narrative, which hinges not only on material capacity but on emotional reception and the ability to project reliability, seriousness, and desirability.

Emotional ascription and emotional expectations

Beyond concerns over who gets to feel what, there are also concerns about who is *expected to feel* what, who is *perceived to feel* what by others, and with what consequences. Actors are often expected by others to display specific emotional reactions in response to particular events (e.g. outrage after an attack, pride following a diplomatic success, regret after a political blunder). In some cases, this *emotional expectation* is followed by an

emotional obligation as actors may ‘seek to impose a requirement on a target group or category of actors to feel a particular emotion’ (Gustafsson and Hall, 2021: 975). Yet even in the absence of obligation, the mere *expectation* of a certain emotion can itself serve strategic purposes. When an actor, say, a state, implies how another state *should* feel about a given situation, this can serve to pressure that state into conformity or, conversely, to mock it for deviating from the emotional script. As I show in the empirical section, such expectations also help shape national images by reinforcing or undermining how a country is perceived on the global stage. These expectations are not fixed; they shift depending on the role or identity a country is seen to embody at that time.

Importantly, how a state is *portrayed* emotionally does not always align with how it actually feels. *Emotional ascription* goes a step further than expectation: it involves attributing a specific emotion to another state, which can influence how others perceive and interact with it.³ Thus, emotional expectations refer to normative assumptions about how a state should respond emotionally to a given event, while emotional ascriptions involve attributing specific emotions to that state, regardless of whether they are genuinely felt. Being depicted as angry, indifferent, or ashamed, regardless of the underlying truth, can carry significant political consequences. For instance, if one state is portrayed as angry, others may respond with caution or ridicule, even if the state itself does not feel anger (Gellwitzki and Houde, 2022; Hall, 2015). This mismatch between expected and perceived emotion can have major implications for a country’s image; perceived pride for something an actor is expected to feel proud of might reinforce a positive image, whereas perceived pride for something the same actor is expected to feel shame about might lead to the opposite. Likewise, the expression of outrage may be interpreted as a demonstration of strength and principled conviction when aligned with prevailing emotional expectations; however, in contexts where such a response is deemed excessive or unwarranted, it may instead be perceived as disproportionate or lacking in diplomatic nuance.

As argued earlier, humour, especially in the form of mockery, plays a strategic role in the politics of emotion. It can reinforce emotional expectations or exaggerate emotional ascriptions to delegitimise a state’s conduct. Mockery is particularly potent when a state fails to display the expected emotional response or is presumed to feel something inappropriate for the situation. For example, if a country fails to display the expected emotional reaction – say, regret after a failed referendum – it may become a target of ridicule for being out of step with what is considered ‘appropriate’ emotional conduct. Alternatively, humour can be weaponised through emotional ascription: a media outlet might portray a country as bitter or humiliated and then mock it for supposedly feeling that way. This dynamic only works if the ascribed emotion aligns with the joke; a country perceived as indifferent would not be an effective target for humiliation. Similarly, a state perceived as angry over ‘losing’ a diplomatic negotiation becomes a viable target for mockery, whereas indifference would render the joke ineffective.⁴ In all cases, using humour as a tool for the politics of emotions indubitably can negatively impact national images⁵ as jokes can enter the collective imaginary about a specific country and even eventually lead to the propagation of stereotypes. In this article, I focus mainly on a specific kind of humour, mockery. I understand mockery here as the act of making fun of an actor or teasing it in a way that undermines its image (see Van Rythoven, 2022 for a detailed account of the role of mockery in diplomacy).

In the case of the UK’s portrayal in foreign media, mockery was a frequent rhetorical device, but this depended on two conditions: (1) that the UK was portrayed as feeling despair, regret, or humiliation (emotional ascription); or (2) that it was implied the UK

should feel those emotions but did not (emotional expectation). In the latter case, the absence of expected emotion added to the humour by casting the UK as oblivious, effectively excluding it from being in on the joke. British politicians, in particular, were mocked for defying norms of expected emotional conduct such as failing to express shame when international audiences might have expected it. The next section proposes an empirical analysis of this phenomenon.

Framing the UK in Australia, France, Germany, and the US

Methodology

The four countries chosen as case studies were picked for the relevance of their perceptions of Britain. Two European countries with whom the UK entertained strong relationships were selected: France and Germany. Two more countries, Australia and the US, two English-speaking countries and former UK colonies, were also considered because of the UK's ambition to forge stronger links with them through schemes such as AUKUS (a security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the US 'that will promote a free and open Indo-Pacific that is secure and stable' (Joint Leaders Statement On AUKUS, Prime Minister of Australia, 2023), the Commonwealth (which Australia is a part of), and the 'special relationship' between the UK and the US (Browning et al., 2021). This article focuses on portrayals of the UK in these countries, typically considered close allies, on the premise that negative portrayals and mockery from such states are more politically and diplomatically consequential than from adversaries. Thus, referring back to the literature on public diplomacy, national images and reputations can vary significantly depending on the audience; this means that the findings from this article cannot be generalised but give insights on (1) some of the ways that the UK has been portrayed in recent times by sympathetic foreign observers, and (2) what role emotions and humour can play in this portrayal in ways that may challenge the ambitions on 'Global Britain'.

The analysis proceeded in two steps. The first step was to get an overview of how the UK was discussed in the different countries through a search on LexisNexis for the terms 'United Kingdom', 'Great Britain', 'UK', and 'Britain'.⁶ Due to the thousands of results for headlines and articles mentioning the UK in the four countries, a systematic, in-depth analysis of all of them was impossible. Still, to get an idea of what general tone could be inferred, I extracted a sample of what LexisNexis considered to be the top 100 headlines for English-speaking news outside of the UK, French-speaking news in Europe, and German-speaking news in Europe and analysed them. While some of the headlines adopted a descriptive tone without much emotional undertones, a significant proportion of them demonstrated more scepticism regarding Britain, depicting an unfavourable picture of it. Such headlines included expressions like 'not so great Britain', 'Post-Brexit Great Britain a little less great', 'Great Britain adrift', 'Great Britain in trouble', 'Great Britain is beautiful. It's also decaying', 'Not-so-Great Britain goes from bad to worse', 'Sadly, Great Britain is no longer great. Just very silly', 'Kein Grinsen über Great Britain (no smile over Great Britain)', 'Großbritannien, der kranke Mann Europas (Great Britain, the sick man of Europe)', 'Little Britain Großbritannien Warum sich das Land in einer Dauerkrise befindet (Little Britain Great Britain Why the country is in a permanent crisis)', 'Von «Cool Britannia» zu «Broken Britain » (From "Cool Britannia" to "Broken Britain")', 'Sad Britain', 'Small Britain', 'From Great Britain to Little England', 'Du Brexit au Bregret (from Brexit to Bregret)', 'La Grande-Bretagne, ce pays pauvre (Great

Britain, this poor country)', 'La Global Britain, un rêve pas si facile à réaliser (Global Britain, a dream not so easy to achieve)', and more. These headlines offered a preliminary sense of tone, affect, and framing, and helped identify recurring tropes of decline, dysfunction, and ridicule. Although they already hint at the emphasis on sadness, regret, and other negative emotions as common tropes in how certain foreign media frame the UK, they do not provide in-depth insights into how exactly this portrayal is constructed.

For this reason, I focus my analysis on four relevant media pieces, one per country selected. These pieces were selected as they were longer pieces that, instead of solely reporting on specific events, were reporting on the UK itself. They thus delved deeper into the context in which different events happened, giving a better overview of the general perceptions of the UK from this perspective. While discourse analysis does not aim to be representative, the data selected can thus provide further insights into how the UK is viewed through emotional lenses. To do so, I rely on Koschut's framework for Emotion Discourse Analysis, which contends that language is linked to emotions, which can be expressed through the use of some words and expressions that hint at them without relying on explicit mentions of specific emotions (Koschut, 2018). For instance, some words like 'chaos' have a negative connotation while others like 'peace' have a positive one. Moreover, metaphors, analogies, and other figures of speech can also translate emotions, which will be context-dependent (Koschut, 2017). In other words, when analysing the media, I did not look only for explicit mentions of emotions like 'sad' but also for more implicit expressions like connotations and figures of speech. Particular attention was paid to (1) emotional ascriptions (what foreign media said Britain felt), (2) emotional expectations (what Britain was presumed to *ought to* feel), and (3) the use of humour – especially mockery – as a framing device. Analysis proceeded in two thematic clusters: first, media portrayals of Britain's general decline and suffering; second, portrayals of political leaders where mockery and emotional dissonance were especially evident.

Keeping all this in mind, the four pieces of media selected are as follows. In Australia, the media piece chosen is a series of five podcast episodes uploaded in 2024, which are roughly 15 to 20 minutes in length, each presented by the nationally owned Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC). The series, named 'Who Broke Britain?', reviews the UK's timeline in recent years and discusses how different events led to the current situation, discussed in depth (ABC, 2024). For France, a longer form written report in the newspaper 'L'Obs', called '*Grande-Bretagne: Le crépuscule anglais*' ('Great Britain: The English Twilight'), published in December 2022, was selected (Funès, 2022). Without covering a specific event, this report gives an overview of the situation in Britain, allowing it to go into some of the nuances behind the series of events the country went through. For Germany, a similar long-form written report was chosen, this time published in the magazine 'Spiegel' in October 2022. The article, 'Die Bananen Insel: Wie sich die Briten zum Gespött Europas machen', or 'Banana Island: How the British are making themselves the laughing stock of Europe', also delves deep into the UK's situation without considering one specific event (DER SPIEGEL, 2022). Finally, in the US, the analysis focused on an article from the 'New Yorker' magazine called 'Time's Up', which concentrates, similarly to the Australian podcast series, on unpacking the UK's current situation and how it got to it (Knight, 2024). While not intended to be representative, these texts offer analytically rich examples of how emotional narratives are constructed across different media ecosystems.

These pieces of media come from different contexts and sources, and the objective here is not to offer a perfect comparison nor treat these as exhaustive ways to understand

the UK's international reputation. However, the analysis illustrates some of the ways emotional ascription and expectations, as well as humour, were used in the framing of the UK. In that sense, they provide examples of how Britain was portrayed through the prism of negative emotions expected and ascribed to it and what role humour played in that portrayal. First, this trend occurred when discussing the UK's general decline and the match between emotional expectations and ascriptions, and second, when reviewing the political failures of its government and how their expected and ascribed emotions mismatch.

Broken Britain: Pitying yet mocking the UK's decline

In numerous of the most relevant headlines selected by LexisNexis and in the four pieces analysed, the UK is essentially portrayed as a broken and depressed country where people must choose between heating their houses and feeding themselves, and where access to something as simple as vegetables is restricted. The language employed translates little hope: the UK is described as adrift and stuck on a slippery slope in a situation that only promises to worsen. Expressions such as 'a country in depression' (L'Obs), 'British disease' (Spiegel), 'Broken Britain' (ABC), 'chaos' (ABC), 'turmoil' (ABC), and 'nightmare' (ABC) are all words used to describe the British predicament. These words help depict a situation with little hope and imply that the UK feels depressed or at least should; in sum, the expected emotional state of the British population should be one of despair.

These emotions were often ascribed in the context of discussing the living conditions of the British population, so they corresponded generally speaking to the expected emotions. There is a strong emphasis in many headlines and all four of the pieces of media on the relative poverty of British people and how badly they are living their everyday lives. The New Yorker article, for instance, presses that 'the country has suffered grievously, [and] these have been years of loss and waste', ascribing negative emotions of suffering to the country. In three out of four of the media pieces analysed, a trope was to catalogue Britain's problems with such exhaustive detail that the listing itself becomes comedic and an ironic overemphasis that gestures towards absurdity. The New Yorker article says that the UK is struggling with 'High levels of employment and immigration, coupled with the enduring dynamism of London', 'national reality of low pay, precarious jobs, and chronic underinvestment', [late trains], [bad traffic], and a 'housing market [that is] a *joke*' (emphasis added). In a similar vein, the article from L'Obs claims that people in Britain 'die of heart attacks, of lung cancers, of cirrhosis, conditions favoured by a poor life hygiene, excess weight, alcohol, tobacco'. In Australia, the ABC series lists Britain's issues and deplors that

institutions are breaking down and more and more people are relying on charities and food handouts. One in five households with children living in them is struggling to afford food. A hundred years ago, London was the largest city on earth, the capital of a global empire that was larger than any other in the history of the world. Even as recently as 17 years ago Britons were the richest people in any of the world's large economies. Since then, they have gone backwards more than any other large economy and this feels broken.

Similar to the French article, the ABC series laments the fact that British people's health is at risk, commenting notably on how waiting times for cancer diagnosis and treatments have increased significantly. The same is portrayed for waiting times in emergency rooms,

as the series insists that ‘for the first time in modern British history life expectancy stopped going up. In fact, for Britain’s poorest people, particularly poor women, it began to go down’. These escalating lists, paired with emotionally bleak ascribed states, position Britain not just as suffering but as laughably, almost cartoonishly, broken.

Indeed, despite a pitying tone stemming from the alignment of emotional expectations and ascriptions, the UK was often treated humorously in foreign media, as it is portrayed as an unserious country and the butt of the joke. Humour, mainly through the form of mockery, was used to emphasise how bad the situation is in Britain and how bad British people should really be feeling about it; in a way, depicting the UK as so unserious is showing how serious the situation really is. Visuals were used to convey this sentiment, with the Spiegel magazine having on its front page an image of Big Ben as a bent browning banana and the title ‘Bananen Insel: Wie sich die Briten zum Gespött Europas machen’ (Banana Island: How the British are making themselves the laughing stock of Europe). These portrayals directly undercut the credibility of the Global Britain narrative, suggesting that far from reasserting itself as a global leader, the UK is increasingly seen as a cautionary tale or comic relief on the world stage.

In the four media pieces selected, textual or verbal humour was also used to emphasise how chaotic the country’s situation was, with the New Yorker’s article claiming that the UK is stuck in an ‘atmosphere of tired, almost constant drama’ and Der Spiegel asking, ‘Are the British crazy?’, making the population the butt of the joke through this mockery. Thus, the negative emotions that are ascribed to the country become a source of entertainment for the media’s audience and humiliation for the UK. For example, both the American and Australian media pieces recalled the 2018 visit of Philip Alston, a UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty who went around the UK to assess its situation and was portrayed as less than impressed with it. The ‘Who Broke Britain’ series emphasises the seriousness of this situation in a comedic way by explaining that ‘this is not a guy that you want coming to check up on your country; it’s like a call from the sewage Department while you’re on holiday, it’s not going to be good news’.

The country’s situation is compared to a ‘soap opera’ (Der Spiegel, ABC) from which ‘the proud United Kingdom has degenerated into’ (Der Spiegel) and a ‘long lineup of bad decisions, missteps, distractions, and atrocious dancing’ (ABC), a trainwreck to witness from abroad. In the New Yorker article, the author summarises his feelings about the UK in the following way:

The period is bisected by the United Kingdom’s decision, in 2016, to leave the European Union, a Conservative fantasy, or nightmare, depending on whom you talk to. Brexit catalyzed some of the worst tendencies in British politics –its superficiality, nostalgia, and love of game play –and exhausted the country’s political class, leaving it ill prepared for the pandemic and the twin economic shocks of the war in Ukraine and the forty-nine-day experimental premiership of Liz Truss. Covering British politics during this period has been like trying to remember, and explain, a very convoluted and ultimately boring dream. If you really concentrate, you can recall a lot of the details, but that doesn’t lead you closer to any meaning.

He continues: ‘you give up on progress, to some extent, and simply pray that this particular chapter of British nonsense will come to an end’. This mention of a hypothetical future in which this ‘nonsense’ ends is mirrored by the comparison of Britain’s current situation with its past one, making the decline even more explicit but also embarrassing and a source of mockery. In the Spiegel article, for instance, the author speaks of a ‘British

disease' that, instead of being inherent to the UK, is seen as a 'disease that broke out years ago and has long since become chronic'. In the French article, this was linked explicitly to Brexit, a decision deemed to be so bad that the British people are 'biting their fingers' about it.⁷ This image conveys strong feelings of regret, ascribing them to the population, but they also implicitly mock the UK for such a decline. The article also contrasts the collective imaginary of Britain with its current situation, describing, for example, the city of Blackpool as a metaphor for the whole country's decline.

It attacks the wrought iron railings of the North Promenade, the street lamps, the benches where British high society sat to enjoy the spray of the Irish Sea. The inexorable corrosion has even attacked the gates of the Imperial Hotel, a Victorian building built in 1867, which are now nothing more than crumbling pieces of scrap metal. The Imperial Hotel once welcomed Charles Dickens, Princesses Margaret and Ann, the sister and daughter of Queen Elizabeth II. Winston Churchill was a regular there, Margaret Thatcher celebrated her sixtieth birthday there. Guests enjoyed the indoor swimming pool, the Turkish baths and the gourmet restaurant. Today, the swimming pool and Turkish baths are closed, the restaurant is no longer gourmet, and the management is scrimping on heating the rooms, even in this rainy month of November.

A similar exercise is done with the NHS, as the author explains that

the famous NHS has been the pride of the kingdom since its creation after the war. It [. . .] is one of the favourite institutions of the British, along with the BBC and the Crown. But today, the edifice is cracking. It is buckling under budget cuts, the Covid pandemic and the departure of European staff due to Brexit.

The UK in the present is thus compared to some of its institutions, which used to be well-regarded and are today a symbol of its decline. This metaphor does not portray Britain in a particularly good light, and the situation is made especially humiliating when other countries act as comparisons. Despite the UK's most prestigious past, it is portrayed as falling behind in a kind of hare versus tortoise situation. In France, the article asks 'But what happened to the United Kingdom? How did the world's fifth largest economy become a country that, according to a Saxo Bank note, 'increasingly resembles an emerging economy'? Almost all the warning lights are red'. The question is less an earnest inquiry than a setup for ridicule; framing Britain's decline as comparable to an 'emerging economy' casts the country as a malfunctioning machine and becomes a vehicle for mockery, cloaking derision in the tone of analysis. In Germany, the article points to 'the problems [have been] long since [Brexit] become impossible to ignore and at some point could no longer be explained by the consequences of the pandemic: chaos in Northern Ireland, Scotland on the verge of collapse, the economic downturn more drastic and lasting than in comparable nations'. In the Australian piece, the situation is summarised with a simple quote: 'one of the richest countries in the world became more unsafe'.

In sum, the UK is portrayed as a broken and depressed country, and the question is not to debate whether or not it is true, but whose fault it is and how stark a contrast it is compared to the UK from the past and other countries. In any case, emotional ascription and expectations were used to portray a picture of the UK population as sharing these depressive feelings. Humour, especially as a kind of sarcasm and depiction of unseriousness about the UK's situation, was a way of emphasising how serious the situation actually is but also mocking the negative emotions its population has been ascribed. While in the American article, as well as in some of the headlines, the blame is shared by Britons who

voted for the Tories and thus are paying the consequences of this ('You cannot say that the country has been ruled against its will'), in Australia, France, and Germany, the tone is more sympathetic and the blame mainly put on the UK government, as emotions are ascribed again to the population: 'The British, it seems, increasingly feel held hostage by their politicians, whom the world once looked up to' (Der Spiegel). Still, even though the expected and ascribed emotions – despair, regret, shame – are largely aligned, they become the very basis for mockery. Britain's suffering is not just mourned but made laughable, turning emotional decline into a public spectacle. Mockery here doesn't reject British despair; it confirms it, sealing emotional decline with the punchline it 'deserves'. The following section examines the specific case of British politicians, and how mockery is used in the case of a mismatch between emotional expectations and ascription.

Banana Island's leadership: The UK government's unserious political failures

A large part of the British's unfortunate situation is attributed to several factors, notably high inflation rates and a difficult time post-pandemic with conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, which many other countries are also going through. However, Brexit and other regrettable decisions made by politicians – like Cameron's austerity measures – are branded as one of the sources of the problem for the UK. For instance, the New Yorker writes that '[The UK] contains regional inequalities greater than those between the east and the west of Germany, or the north and the south of Italy – inequalities that have been allowed by successive governments to grow to shameful extremes' (New Yorker). Thus, shame is here expected by the media, as other negative emotions of despair are ascribed to the British population. These decisions are portrayed as the reason why it is doing worse than other countries; thus, the British population is pitied as they are depicted as paying for their politicians' mistakes. Yet these politicians are not portrayed as exhibiting the appropriate emotional response to these mistakes.

This dynamic is exemplified in many headlines and all four of the in-depth pieces. From the New Yorker's article's perspective, the Conservative party is said to have 'excelled at diminishing Britain's political landscape and shrinking the sense of what is possible' and to be responsible for the country's troubles, as it asks, 'What have they done to the country?'. Discussing the consequences of Britain's bad governance, the Spiegel article taps into negative emotions by recounting that 'all over the country, food bank operators are sounding the alarm: As temperatures drop, more and more people are faced with the choice of "heating or eating"'. While not explicitly referring to emotions, it paints the image of a country stuck in misery where basic needs are not fulfilled, implying that if British people are in such a dire state, it is the fault of their politicians, who *should* feel ashamed. However, when discussing Philip Alston's, the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty, visit the New Yorker writes that 'he recalled a strong sense of denial, or ignorance, among British politicians about the consequences of their decisions'. In a similar way, in the Australian piece, also talking about Alston's visit and listing his findings, quotes him as he summarises the following:

what I saw in food banks, schools, community centres, job centres, libraries, and elsewhere is a lot of misery. A lot of people who feel that the system is failing them. A lot of people who feel that the system is already there just to punish them. [. . .] People who feel that despite the fact that they are really down and need a little bit of help that they could always have counted on in yesterday's Britain, they're just not able to get.

Following this quote, the ABC series summarises the situation by saying that ‘Fourteen years after austerity was introduced to Britain, the data is in. It didn’t work, and in many cases, it did the opposite of what it was meant to do’. Cutting back to another quote from Alston (‘Britain is certainly capable of eliminating most if not all of its poverty if it wanted to but it’s clear there’s a political choice, that it doesn’t want to’), the piece repeats in a grave tone that ‘it doesn’t want to’. Here again, thus, the reporting paints an image of a miserable Britain, an assessment based on experts’ findings, and its people suffering from this situation and feelings of disappointment are ascribed to them. However, what is striking is the contrast with the perceived lack of political will to solve the situation; British politicians are seen as indifferent to the situation they have created, being ascribed emotionlessness as opposed to the appropriate expected emotions of shame or, at least, regret. This is insisted on further in the ABC series while reporting on the legacy of David Cameron.

But when his austerity programme began to drive millions of Britons to rely on food banks to feed their families, and saw life expectancy flatline, and saw prisons close to bursting, and saw schools begin to crumble, he didn’t waver. When his welfare cuts saw people have to leave the workforce to care for children, the elderly, or people with disabilities, when hundreds of libraries closed, when councils went bankrupt, when economic growth stagnated, he didn’t have the courage to adapt. His leadership abilities were shown to be woefully inadequate when he accidentally upended 50 years of economic policy and brought about Brexit. Since then, populism has run rampant. Theresa May, Boris Johnson, and Rishi Sunak have repeatedly abandoned their ideologies for the sake of staying in power. When we ask who broke Britain, the answer begins with David Cameron. The others often blamed for Britain’s decline, Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, and others only gained prominence because of Cameron’s failures of leadership. Of course, they only stayed in power because of the colossal ineptitude of their opposition, who lost four elections in a row before finally winning one this week.

Mockery is implicitly present throughout this intervention as it highlights, through the use of terms like ‘colossal ineptitude’ and ‘woeful incompetence’, the leaders’ failure to address the crises they have caused. This exaggeration underscores the contrast between the expected emotions and the ascribed emotions of indifference, suggesting a detachment from the consequences of their decisions. It also frames these leaders as out-of-touch figures who are incapable of fulfilling the emotional expectations associated with their leadership roles. This gap is emphasised more explicitly when discussing politicians themselves, as they are depicted as more the butt of the jokes than the British people are. This was the case in all four pieces analysed. In Australia, the word ‘circus’ is used to describe Boris Johnson’s term as Prime Minister, and the following extract was intercut with videos of politicians:

[The difficult situation] is about the past 14 years of Conservative party leadership from their win back in 2010 all the way up to the general election that’s happening next month [cut to a video of Rishi Sunak in the rain trying to look heroic]. The country has gone through a staggering change, which has at times been chaotic [cut to Lizz Truss saying ‘I am a fighter and not a quitter’], hilarious [cut to Boris Johnson stuck on a zipline in London saying ‘Can you get me a rope’], depressing [cut to Theresa May coughing while some of the letters stuck on the wall making a slogan behind her are falling], and often absolutely farcical [cut to various videos such as Boris Johnson on a tractor, Theresa May dancing, the ‘Liz Truss lettuce’].

Similarly to the comparison with a ‘circus’, other comparisons are used to convey a message. For instance, still in the ABC series, David Cameron’s resignation after Brexit is described as follows:

He was so thrilled to be resigning that he sang a little song [. . .] now why would someone be so thrilled to resign as PM [. . .]? Well, in Cameron's case, it's akin to singing a little ditty on your way out of a house party after you clogged the toilet.

The fact that Cameron seemed 'thrilled' to resign, even singing a little song, highlights the disconnect between the gravity of his political failure and the absence of any remorse or shame – emotions that would be expected from someone in his position. Boris Johnson was also mocked in the American article, as the author explains that 'Johnson's celebrity (the hair, the mess, the faux Churchillian vibes, the ridiculous Latin) was the glue that held it all together. He sensed the public mood. (With Johnson, that was not the same as doing something about it)'. In mocking Johnson's persona, the article taps into emotional ascriptions of indifference by highlighting his ridiculousness and incompetence, portraying him as out of touch with the severity of the situation. Meanwhile, the German article's target was Liz Truss, who was teased with mentions of 'Lettuce Liz' but also of her fondness for Thatcher-inspired aesthetics ('it became clear to everyone that lots of beautiful photos on Instagram do not make a Thatcher') and her broken promises ('On Thursday afternoon, a good 24 hours after she said in the British Parliament, "I am a fighter and not one to give up", she gave up'). In France, Rishi Sunak was the mocked one, as the French article recalls, 'This summer, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, one of the richest men in the country, who was caught on camera, was unable to fill up his car with petrol properly without his driver present'.

Thus, humour is used to emphasise just how bad the situation is while expecting some embarrassment or shame that British politicians should feel about their actions and implying that they are not. Political figures like David Cameron, Boris Johnson, and Liz Truss are depicted in a farcical light, with their actions ridiculed through references to their embarrassing moments. This mockery serves to emphasise the disconnect between the expected emotions (shame, regret) and the lack of emotional engagement shown by the politicians. It reinforces the media's portrayal of a British public enduring hardship without the necessary political empathy. In turn, this contributes to the negative image of the UK as a declining country. The UK politicians are portrayed as out-of-touch clowns who sabotaged the country and got away with it, as opposed to feeling the shame and embarrassment they are expected to feel. In contrast, by emphasising how terrible they have made the situation, the media positions British people as the politicians' victims, whether they are passively suffering from it or are too naïve to see what they are stuck with.

By tapping on these emotions, mockery becomes a tool for highlighting the misalignment between the suffering of the British people, who are ascribed negative emotions of despair, and the indifference of their political leaders, who are expected to feel shame but instead appear oblivious to the damage they've caused. Humour portrayals of Britain as a nation in decline, rendering it both pitiable and ridiculous, yet mockery also arises when emotional expectations are not met – especially in depictions of political leaders who appear complacent amid national crises. Humour exposes an emotional deficit that becomes laughable in its own right; this dual function of mockery as both reinforcing and destabilising emotional congruence sustains the UK's image as simultaneously tragic and farcical. In doing so, it shapes a global perception of Britain as a once-serious power now reduced to spectacle.

Conclusion

Theoretically, by focusing on how emotional expectations and ascriptions function within humour, particularly through mockery, this article contributed to the understanding of

national image construction and soft power dynamics by highlighting an underexplored aspect of international perceptions. It argues that foreign media's portrayal of a nation's emotional state, and whether it is empathised with or ridiculed, serves as a key mechanism through which national images are constructed. Specifically, this article revealed how humour both reflects and reinforces the emotional narratives projected onto a country. This article thus contributes to ongoing work on the emotional dimensions of soft power, international recognition, and humour in IR by suggesting that emotional reputations are not only performed by states themselves but also shaped, and at times undermined, by external emotional framings. The concepts of emotional expectation and ascription offer one possible lens for capturing how such framings work, particularly when mediated through mockery. While recent scholarship has highlighted the affective underpinnings of global hierarchies, this article draws attention to how humour can reinforce or disrupt them by framing states as emotionally incoherent or unserious. In that sense, it contributes to understanding how emotional credibility is negotiated and sometimes destabilised in international discourse.

Empirically, it has advanced our understanding of the challenges the UK faces as it tries to re-establish its place on the international stage. In the last few years, the country has undergone a series of destabilising events: a referendum and the subsequent departure from the EU that ensued, the global COVID-19 pandemic, the death of the monarch Queen Elizabeth II, violent anti-immigration protests, and an ongoing cost of living crisis (see Gellwitz et al., 2024). These events were also enacted against the backdrop of a succession of six Prime Ministers since the Brexit vote, illustrative of the sense of instability. Since the 2016 referendum about leaving the EU, the UK has thus seemed to be navigating one crisis after the other, which, as put by ex-Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in November 2022, led its reputation to take 'a bit of a knock' (BBC News, 2022). This concern was echoed by the following Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who, as he arrived in power in July 2024, claimed to want to 'reconnect with our allies', 'once again stand strong on the world stage', and 'reset' Britain's role internationally (Sands, 2024).

The media headlines examined show a clear tendency to ascribe emotions of sadness, regret, and despair to the UK, with mentions of 'sad, little, and not-so-great Britain' while often incorporating humorous punchlines. This emotional framing is further explored in the in-depth analysis of the four pieces of media, which illustrates how humour operates in these depictions. Humour can either reinforce the ascribed emotional states when they align with expected emotions, emphasising how tragicomic the situation is, or it can highlight the gap between emotional expectations and reality, particularly when political leaders fail to meet these expectations. In such cases, mockery becomes a tool to emphasise the emotional deficit, underscoring the absurdity of the situation and enhancing the sense of ridicule directed at the UK and its leadership. The analysis remains limited to portrayals of Britain in allied media and does not aim to provide a representative picture. Further research might explore how emotional framings operate in adversarial contexts, in multilateral settings, or over longer time periods. The framework developed here could be adapted to examine how other emotions, such as pride, nostalgia, or moral outrage, contribute to shaping international status and legitimacy.

Mockery and emotional ascription have significant implications for the UK's 'Global Britain' project; when a nation is repeatedly portrayed as the object of pity, despair, or ridicule, these emotional framings can undermine the state's credibility, authority, and aspirational narratives necessary for (re)establish the country's place internationally. When a state's projected image fails to align with perceived emotional norms and elicits

mockery, soft power potential is weakened. In the case of the UK, despite efforts to rebrand its international role through the Global Britain agenda, the gap between official narratives and external portrayals could undermine the country's credibility in ally countries. The ridicule and pity directed at the UK emphasise perceived dysfunction and incompetence, which stands in stark contrast to the aspirational goals of Global Britain. These negative emotional associations have the potential to undermine the UK's efforts to project strength and stability on the global stage, leading to diminished trust and lessened diplomatic and economic influence. Given that national images are intimately tied to emotional recognition, the UK's negative portrayal risks reinforcing existing doubts about its capacity to lead or engage meaningfully in international affairs. To rebuild its position as a global actor, the UK must address the emotional underpinnings of its international image, shifting the narrative from one of crisis and failure to one of resilience and competent leadership. Without such a reframing, the ambitions of Global Britain are likely to remain unfulfilled as emotional dissonance continues to hinder the country's soft power and international standing.

While soft power is often understood through institutional metrics such as cultural exports or diplomatic influence, the emotional framings explored here, particularly those of ridicule, frustration, and pity, shape the affective context within which the UK is received abroad. These framings do not merely reflect reputational shifts; they actively condition how receptive foreign publics and elites are to British influence, policies, and partnerships. The repeated portrayal of the UK as unpredictable or absurd may gradually erode trust and credibility – key components of soft power – making it harder for the UK to assert normative leadership or attract alignment on global issues over time. In an era of affective geopolitics, the stories told about Britain abroad, and the emotions they evoke may be as consequential as its policies, positioning soft power as both a reputational and an emotional asset under strain. The struggle to reframe 'Global Britain' is thus not just a geopolitical challenge, it is an emotional one, with soft power at its fragile core.

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Notes

1. 'In some cases, this can also lead to extremist nationalism or chauvinism' (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2003: 436).
2. Positioning itself as a morally good country by, for example, contributing to humanitarian aid.
3. Ascription in IR is different from the collective emotion ascription concept from social psychology, which refers more to one's perception of sharing a collective emotion (e.g. in X country, 'we' feel like . . .) (Gilbert, 2014) which could be more akin to works on vicarious identification in IR (Browning and Haigh, 2022; Browning et al., 2021).
4. Unless, of course, the country is mocked for being oblivious to its defeat.
5. In some cases, humour can also be used to influence a national image positively. For example, when individuals from Western countries create or share humorous memes about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which can make Russia look inadequate and incompetent, but Ukraine look heroic.
6. These terms were also looked for in French and German.
7. Bitterly regret something.

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