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# A syntactic and pragmatic study of nominal vocatives in the Twitter exchanges of rappers' fans



Ignacio M. Palacios Martínez\*

Department of English and German, University of Santiago de Compostela, 15.782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine nominal vocatives in Twitter through the analysis of 1500 posts extracted from the accounts of five well-known female and male rappers. From this total, a sample of 550 vocatives were analysed. Attention is paid to their frequency, class, position, type of clause and the polarity in which they occur, and the pragmatic functions they express. The factor of gender is also investigated. The analysis reveals that those posting to these Twitter accounts make use of a very large and varied repertoire of nominal vocatives. The group of familiarisers clearly prevails over other categories of vocatives and this high frequency of familiarisers contrasts to the situation in spontaneous conversations where first names tend to be the most common. Vocatives in final position clearly prevail over initial and medial position. Besides, Twitter posts containing nominal vocatives in final position tend to be short while those in initial position are far longer. Polarity does not seem to have a strong influence. Some differences, however, are also observed according to the use of nominal vocatives with respect to gender. As in spontaneous conversation, vocatives in Twitter generally serve to strengthen social relationships (creating solidarity, complimenting, expressing appreciation, reinforcing the group identity) while discourse-oriented functions relating to topic and turn management are not so common.

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## 1. Introduction

Although general address terms<sup>1</sup> in offline communication have been explored extensively over recent decades (Brown and Gilman, 1960; Braun, 1988; Leech, 1999; McCarthy and O'Keefe, 2003; Rendle-Short, 2010; Heyd, 2014; Clancy, 2015; Adams, 2018; Kluge and Moyna, 2019), this is not the case with Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) (Herring, 2003; Thurlow et al., 2004; Yus, 2011; Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011; Herring et al., 2013; Tagg, 2015; Hoffmann, 2017). Research here "is still in its infancy" (Oliveira, 2013: 292), and the number of studies remains far more limited (Asprey and Tagg, 2019: 5).

This study examines nominal vocatives in Twitter discourse through the analysis of a sample of 1500 posts extracted from the accounts of five well-known female and male rappers from London between July 2018 and September 2021 since address terms are important in the language used by the members of the rapper community. The focus will be on their frequency,

\* Tel.: +34607111072.

E-mail address: [ignacio.palacios@usc.es](mailto:ignacio.palacios@usc.es).

<sup>1</sup> Ton (2019:23) makes a useful distinction within the general category of terms of address between self-address terms, those used for the second person (address terms), and terms that are used to refer to non-interlocutors (terms of reference). In this study we deal with a special group of address terms: nominal vocatives.

class, position, type of clause and the polarity in which they occur, as well as the pragmatic functions they express. The factor of gender will also be addressed, towards an understanding of the extent to which there may be differences in the use of vocatives according to the gender of those engaged in this digital genre. Where possible, comparisons will be made with the behaviour of nominal vocatives in spontaneous conversation. The conclusions will serve to provide a more detailed account of both Twitter discourse generally and nominal vocatives in particular, looking at whether differences exist in terms of the use of nominal vocatives in digital communication, in this case Twitter, and general conversation.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Vocatives in spoken discourse

Vocatives can be classified as general terms of address, and defined as nominal constituents loosely integrated into the rest of the utterance that serve to “designate collocutors or refer to them in some way” (Braun, 1988: 9). Through the use of these items the speaker typically addresses or refers to the interlocutor, and this is done for a variety of reasons. The term “vocative”, from the Latin *vocātīvus* (Oxford English Dictionary), refers specifically to this sense of invocation, call or appeal, although, as we will see below, their use can also convey other meanings.

Nominal vocatives can be classified into a number of categories (Quirk et al., 1985: 773–775; Huddleston and Pullum et al., 2002: 522–523; Biber et al., 2021: 1105–1108): familiarisers, which denote a close relationship between the speakers participating in the exchange (*man, bro*), offensive or derogatory, these often equivalent to insults (*bitch, bastard*), terms of endearment, which generally express feelings of affection and tenderness (*baby, love*), family or kinship terms (*daddy*), names and titles (*Mr. Roberts*), honorifics, which usually show an attitude of respect (*sir, madam*) and thus contrast with familiarisers, impersonal (*someone open the window, please*), and elaborate structures (*those who did not accept the proposal*).

The position in the clause of these nominal vocatives is also relevant, in that it can vary a great deal and is directly related to the pragmatic function they perform (Leech, 1999; Clancy, 2015; Asprey and Tagg, 2019; Biber et al., 2021) (see Section 4.3). Nominal vocatives can be found in initial position.<sup>2</sup>

- (1) *Bro* big respect (Dappy, 2021)

They can also occur in medial position, that is, in the middle of the turn or, in this case, the post:

- (2) Loving it *mate* currently serving a 14 day isolation with wife n kids (Dizzee Rascal, 2020)

However, they are very often found in final position, in this case at the end of a post.

- (3) Thanks, *babes*. (Wiley, 2018)

Very occasionally they may even stand alone, thus constituting a whole turn or post. In such cases, the posters in our data will generally be expressing a compliment to or their recognition of the artist in question, as in (4), or seeking the attention of the artist in question (5). Notice how in both cases the vocatives may be accompanied by an exclamation mark, an emoji, or indeed both; these added elements serve to intensify the expressive function of the form (Dainas and Herring, 2021).

- (4) *Queen!* (Little Simz, 2021)  
 (5) *Wiley!* ❤️ (Wiley, 2018)

As noted above, the bulk of the literature on address terms in spoken English, and more specifically on nominal vocatives, is very broad (Ervin-Trip, 1971; Zwicky, 1974, 2016; Braun, 1988; Leech, 1999; Sonnenhauser and Aziz Hanna, 2013; Kluge and Moyna, 2019, to mention just a few). For the purpose of the review, this could be organised in three main groups: (i) Those focussed on particular varieties or dialects of English, (ii) studies dealing with vocatives according to type of discourse and genre, and (iii) a third group analysing one specific familiariser. There follows a brief review of the main studies.

Within the first group, we find Brown and Ford's (1961), Leech (1999), Murphy and Farr (2012), Luckman de López (2013) and Urchuk and Loureiro-Rodríguez (2019).

Thus, Brown and Ford's seminal paper considered address terms in American English, drawing on spoken data from four contexts while Leech (1999) introduced a contrastive perspective by comparing the use of address terms in British and American English, concluding that in the latter there is a stronger tendency for the use of familiarisers in final position, a tendency that was also identified by Biber et al. (2021: 1105). Murphy and Farr (2012) took a similar approach to Irish English and they observed that in adult discourse, first names, plus five specific familiarisers *lads, girl, man, dude* and *guys*, are the most frequent vocatives, while *pet, love* and *sweetheart* are notably frequent within the group of terms of endearments. Luckmann de Lopez (2013) considered familiarisers in Tyneside English, in which *man* clearly stands out, in terms of both its

<sup>2</sup> All examples have been transcribed as found in the original post, with no alterations or changes. The information in brackets indicates the Twitter account from which each example was taken, plus the corresponding year.

high frequency and its characteristic intonation pattern. Finally, [Urichuk and Loureiro-Rodríguez \(2019\)](#) described the self-reported use of masculine vocatives (*man*, *bro*, *dude* and *brah/broh*) in Canadian English, based on data gathered by means of a questionnaire adapted from [Kiesling \(2004\)](#). Their findings showed that *dude* and *man* are the most common, while the more recent forms *brah* and *bruh* are closely associated with young speakers.

As mentioned above, other studies have looked at how vocatives vary according to type of discourse and genre ([Wilson and Zeitlyn, 1995](#); [Jaworsky and Galasinsli, 2000](#); [McCarthy and O'Keefe, 2003](#); [Quaglio, 2009](#); [Formentelli, 2014](#); [Clancy, 2015](#); [Pauletto and Aronsson, 2017](#); [Adams, 2018](#); [Landmann, 2021](#); [Palacios Martínez, 2021 a](#)). Thus, [Wilson and Zeitlyn \(1995\)](#), [Clancy \(2015\)](#), and [Pauletto and Aronsson \(2017\)](#) explored the presence and functions of these items in family discourse. [Jaworsky and Galasinsli \(2000\)](#) considered the role of vocatives in the political arena showing that address terms are consciously used by participants in political discourse to gain legitimacy for their own ideas and to help political leaders create positive images of themselves. [McCarthy and O'Keefe \(2003\)](#) focused on vocatives in casual conversations and radio phone-in shows. Vocative use here was much higher in the radio data, while in casual conversation these forms served to create and foster social relationships between speaker and addressee. Two studies looking at TV and film focused on the use and frequency of vocatives by comparing the use of familiarisers and terms of endearment in TV series and films with spontaneous conversations. [Quaglio \(2009\)](#) showed how the nominal vocatives *guys*, *man*, *dude* and *buddy* are more frequent in the series *Friends* than in standard conversation. In a similar vein, [Formentelli \(2014\)](#) studied the use of vocatives in a corpus of 24 American and British films. Results here also showed a higher proportion of these address terms in film dialogues than in normal conversations. [Adams \(2018\)](#) is a particularly interesting study for our purposes here, in that she analysed address terms in Grime music, seeking thus to understand how Grime MCs address and refer to other people in their lyrics. A total of 106 nominal address terms were identified. The familiarisers *man*, *fam*, *blud*, *guys* and *brudda* were the most common, followed by *mum*, *manden*, *don* and *dawg*. [Landmann \(2021\)](#) assessed terms of endearment from a diachronic perspective, using data from the Historical Thesaurus of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. She looked at a wide variety of lexical items here, from those used by lovers to refer to each other, to expressions of endearment for children and elderly people. Whereas endearment vocatives were the object of attention in [Landmann \(2021\)](#), [Palacios Martínez, 2021a](#) focused on taboo or offensive terms of address in the language of London teenagers in an analysis of data drawn from COLT (The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language) and LEC (London English Corpus). These taboo vocatives were used frequently by young speakers in their interactions, although it was observed that such tokens often lost their offensive meaning, serving rather to reinforce the bonds between young speakers, sometimes even carrying affectionate connotations.

Finally, several studies have taken one or two specific familiarisers as the focus of their analysis ([Kiesling, 2004](#); [Alba Juez, 2009](#); [Rendle-Short, 2010](#); [Cheshire, 2013](#); [Stenström, 2014](#); [Heyd, 2014](#)). Thus, [Kiesling \(2004\)](#), for example, explored the functions and pragmatic meanings of *dude* in the exchanges of young American speakers. Similarly, [Rendle-Short \(2010\)](#) considered the use of *mate* in Australian English, finding that the term was present not only in the speech of young men but also in the interactions of young women (18–29 years). [Cheshire \(2013\)](#) has also looked at the use of *man* in Multicultural London English. She showed how this nominal vocative had its origins in the corresponding noun, which then evolved into an address term and later became a pronoun.

From a contrastive perspective, [Alba-Juez's \(2009\)](#) study compared the English vocative *man* with the Spanish *tío/macho*. Similarly, [Stenström \(2014\)](#) devoted a few pages to general and taboo vocatives within her general contrastive work on the use of pragmatic markers in the language of English and Spanish teenagers. She observed notable differences in the frequency of use of these terms with Spanish teenagers, who use 9.3 vocatives per 1000 words, compared to just 1.1 for their English counterparts. Finally, in another contrastive study, [Heyd \(2014\)](#) considered the American English *dude* and the German *alter*, looking at morphosyntactic, semantic, phonological and socio-pragmatic features of both these terms of address.

## 2.2. Vocatives in computer mediated communication

As noted above, the number of studies on general address terms ([Kluge and Moyna, 2019](#)) in CMC is scarce, and even more so on nominal vocatives. [Oliveira \(2013\)](#) provides a comprehensive state of the art on studies of address in CMC up to that year. She organises these into three main groups or strands: the role of address in greeting and leave-taking behaviour in interactions, the analysis of conversational forms, and address in collaborative learning tasks and in educational settings. In what follows, this structure will be retained in a broader review of studies in these areas.

Within the first group we find the study by [Hastrlová \(2009\)](#), who considered address terms in English-language Internet Relay Chat (IRC). She found that over half of the exchanges were initiated with no greeting or form of address, while 86% of participants ended their sessions without any kind of closure. [Anglemark \(2009\)](#), by turn, looked at address forms in various digital genres (emails, online chats and weblogs), analysing data from self-compiled corpora. Results showed that CMC users employ different types of address terms in different CMC genres. Forenames and nicknames were found in email and chat material, while weblogs contained a high number of common nouns as headwords in expressions of address.

Other CMC studies have explored the extent to which the use of address terms follows usual conversational patterns. Thus, [Postmes et al. \(2000\)](#) assessed the use of second person pronouns in a Dutch email program, and [Oliveira \(2013\)](#) showed how address forms played a key role in a university user network.

A further group of studies focussed on address terms in the educational domain. [Nguyen and Kellogg \(2005\)](#), in a study of the posts of international students in an academic forum in Hawaii, revealed that students, in on-line forums, addressed their peers using their names when expressing agreement, the authors concluding that this type of CMC favoured the establishment and

strengthening of bonds between participants and also reinforced their feelings of belonging to a community. [Belz and Kinginger \(2002\)](#) also focused on the use of formal and informal second person pronouns (the so-called T/V distinction) with a group of American students of French and German. These students exchanged emails and chats with a group of counterparts who were learning English in France and Germany, and the results indicated that they showed more dynamism over time and became more aware of the T forms of solidarity thanks to the collaborative nature of the work in which they were engaged. Some research, [Aarsand \(2008\)](#), for example, has even looked at the use of address terms in offline (face-to-face) and online communication (MSN Messenger) by the same group of participants, and here the use of address terms was indeed found to be very scarce, restricted to an instance of name-calling and a comment about a girl's name by another user. More recently, [Hultgren \(2017\)](#) focused on the linguistic expression of politeness in telephone communication, drawing on data from an onshore call centre in Scotland, and including not only authentic service interactions but also interviews, observations, and institutional documents. Here, vocatives were seen to prevail over other types of informality markers, and were used by the operatives at this call centre as rationalised forms of politeness to build rapport with callers and to provide a more personalised kind of customer care. Finally, [Asprey and Tagg \(2019\)](#) looked at the pragmatic roles played by vocatives in a corpus of private mobile text messages. The analysis showed that vocatives are used here to express a number of interpersonal functions such as greetings, thanking and badinage. The authors also identified an unexpected function of vocatives in text messaging, that of providing focus that serves to draw attention to the message and to mitigate the demand for a quick reply. Vocatives are also used by the participants in these exchanges to position themselves and to create a shared identity. Some differences were also identified in vocative use according to gender; while young men opted for familiarisers such as *bro* or *buddy*, their feminine counterparts preferred terms of endearment such as *hon* and *babe*. The authors concluded by questioning the traditional distinction between familiarisers and endearments as proposed by [Biber et al. \(2021\)](#), and suggested that this difference may have more to do with the gender of the users than with formal meaning or any difference in function.

Studies on nominal vocatives in Twitter discourse are, as we have noted, quite limited, and this is the gap that this paper aims to fill, looking specifically at the exchanges of rappers with their fans and also at communication between rappers' followers.

The microblogging platform Twitter is characterised as being highly conversational ([Java et al., 2007](#); [Honeycutt and Herring, 2009](#); [Zappavigna, 2012: 30](#)), providing recent, real data that allow us to study features such as nominal vocatives in spontaneous exchanges and interactions. Compared with other methods of language data collection ([Palacios Martínez, I. 2020](#)), such as corpora or sociolinguistic interviews, Twitter presents limitations in terms of how variables such as gender, age, social background, ethnicity, degree of formality and language variety can be controlled, although the large amount of data it provides, together with its immediacy and genuine nature, may compensate here to some extent. Indeed, Twitter discourse has been analysed widely "across most major fields in linguistics, ranging from pragmatics, sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics to computational linguistics, and systemic functional linguistics" ([Zappavigna, 2012: 203](#)), in that it offers complementary information on new linguistic trends and innovations in this digital genre and more broadly in language.

We might also highlight the fact that whereas rap, Grime and hip-hop have been studied from a variety of sociological, anthropological, cultural and ethnographic perspectives ([Alim, 2006](#); [Alim et al., 2008](#); [Barron, 2013](#); [White, 2016, 2017](#); [Bramwell and Brutterworth, 2019](#)) in relation to British English, and more particularly in some London multi-ethnic varieties, little attention has thus far been paid to the question of address and reference terms, an exception being [Adams \(2018\)](#), reviewed above. In the communities of these musical genres, group and member relationships are extremely important. Nominal familiarisers, and also very often taboo vocatives, serve to form and reinforce human relationships by reinforcing bonds and solidarity. This may explain why these terms of address play such an important role in the expression of the practitioners of these musical genres. Also, as [Adams \(2018: 13\)](#) has observed, Grime artists frequently allude to their address and reference systems in their lyrics, so it can be said that they tend to be consciously aware of the existence and function of these systems.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data

A sample of 1500 Twitter posts were analysed, these dating from between July 2018 and September 2021, with some minor variations in time frame due to the availability of data.<sup>3</sup> The posts were from the Twitter accounts of five well-known London rappers, three male (Dappy, Dizzee Rascal and Wiley) and two female (Ray Blk and Little Simz), all of these being stage names. [Table 1](#) below provides some general information about the different names (real, stage, Twitter), origin, background, age, gender and period considered for the selection of posts by each rapper.

The analysis focussed on the posts of these five artists plus all responses by their fans and followers. Messages that rappers and others retweeted were not considered, since it was sometimes difficult to verify the authorship of these, and hence the data might have skewed the findings. In addition, retweets sometimes involve alterations of the original tweet, and this might have brought about changes in their meaning and interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> The Twitter posts of the five rappers were not fully available in all cases for the whole time frame, specifically in the case of Wiley, Ray BLK and Little Simz.

**Table 1**  
General background and biographical information on the rappers considered.

Artist's name	Stage name	Twitter name	Age	Gender	Origin & background	Followers & achievements	Period covered
Costadinos Contostavlos	Dappy <sup>a</sup>	The Dappy	34	male	Born in London of Greek-Cypriot origin	720,000 followers	2018–2020
Richard Kylea Cowie	Wiley (Kat) Godfather/King (of Grime)	Wiley/Eskimo	39	male	Born in London of Trinidadian and Antiguan descent	His page was suspended in 2021 after anti-Semitic posts. Member of the Order of the British Empire (2018)	2018–2019
Dylan Kwabena Mills	Dizzee Rascal	Dizzee Rascal/Raskitt/Dizz	37	male	Born in London of Nigerian and Ghanaian descent	374,300 followers. Awarded the Mercury Prize in 2003. Member of the Order of the British Empire (2018)	2018–2021
Rita Ekwere	Ray BLK (Building Living Knowing)	Ray Blk/Raydum	27	female	Born in Nigeria but grew up in London since the age of 4	20,800 followers. She won the BBC's Sound of 2017.	2021
Simbiaulu Abigola Abiola Ajijawo	Little Simz	Little Simz/Simz/Simbi	27	female	British-Nigerian	100,006 followers. Nominated for the Mercury Prize, she won Best Album at both the Ivor Morello and the NME Awards.	2020–2021

<sup>a</sup> The term *dappy*, also *dippy*, is a slang term for insane, crazy or disorganised (OED, [Green's slang dictionary](#)).

### 3.2. Coding of the data

All the nominal vocatives identified in the selected tweets, 570 in total, were entered in an Access database and coded according to the following fields: token, spelling variant (since this varied in some cases, e.g. *baby*, *babe*, *bae*, *bbe*, see appendix), date of the posting of the tweet, position of the nominal vocative in the post (initial, middle, final, on its own), type of clause where it was found (declarative, exclamative, imperative, question), polarity (positive, negative), pragmatic function (relational, focusing, attention-getter, humour/badinage, mitigating, compliment, etc.), poster's gender, and post length. An additional field in the database was reserved for any further remarks.

### 3.3. Criteria used for the selection of the material

The accounts of these five artists were chosen because: (i) they all come from London and can all be considered to be users of Multicultural London English ([Cheshire et al., 2011](#); [Torgersen et al., 2011](#); [Cheshire, 2013](#); [Fox, 2015](#); [Palacios Martínez, 2021b](#)), a multiethnolect that presents innovative language features due to its high proportion of young speakers, forms such as new quotatives (*this is* + pronoun), non-standard use of past BE forms and definite and indefinite article forms, *man* as a new pronoun, invariant tags such as *innit* and *you get me*, etc.), and because Multicultural London English itself emerged in a context of language contact where individuals of different language and cultural backgrounds (Indian, North-African, Caribbean, local) interact and coexist in the large metropolitan area of London; (ii) they all play prominent roles in the current music scene in the UK, have large numbers of fans and followers, having all received various awards and other forms of public recognition; (iii) they themselves manage their own accounts, that is, they do not have community or media managers in that role, and hence their posts reflect their own spontaneous forms of expression; (iv) these artists can be regarded as belonging to a closed community of practice online ([Tagg, 2015: 230](#)), in that many of them are clearly very familiar with the topics discussed, they share a common interest in the type of music involved, and seem to know about one another, since many of them have been posting on the same site and using the same accounts for quite some time; (v) the interactions are very lively, are expressed in natural and spontaneous language, and are interesting from a linguistic perspective, with posters showing high levels of creativity and innovation in their use of language; (vi) apart from the artists who maintain these accounts, other participants in the exchanges include their followers or fans, the vast majority being quite young. We might bear in mind here that young speakers are considered to be language innovators and introducers of linguistic change ([Eckert, 1988](#); [Stenström et al., 2002](#); [Palacios Martínez, I. 2011](#); [Tagliamonte 2016](#)), although we must also recall that, as noted above, the age variable cannot be fully accounted for in all cases on Twitter accounts.

### 3.4. Topics discussed in the Twitter exchanges

The topics discussed in these posts include the releases of new songs and records, merchandising and advertising, fans' reactions to and comments on songs, concerts, shows and interviews, projects that these rappers are involved in, disputes



#### 4.2. Vocative types

A total of 78 different nominal vocatives were recorded, excluding from the token count spelling variants of many of these (see list in appendix 1 for the wide variety recorded). Well over half of the vocatives, some 327 (59.5%), were familiarisers, whereas a total of 83 tokens (15.1%) were terms of endearment. Following these in order of frequency were a group of 69 first name vocatives (12.5%), and 28 nicknames (5.1%). The next largest group was of honorifics, with 18 (3.3%) tokens. Contrary to what had been expected (Palacios Martínez, 2021a), only 14 (2.5%) tokens of offensive or taboo vocatives were found. We also found 7 examples in which the personal pronoun of the second person *you* collocated with *two*, *all* and *lot* (*you two*, *you all*, *you lot*), 2 examples of first name plus family name (*Dizzee Rascal*), and 2 family vocatives (*uncle* and *auntie*). All these latter categories, taken together, amounted to just 2% of the total. (see Fig. 1)

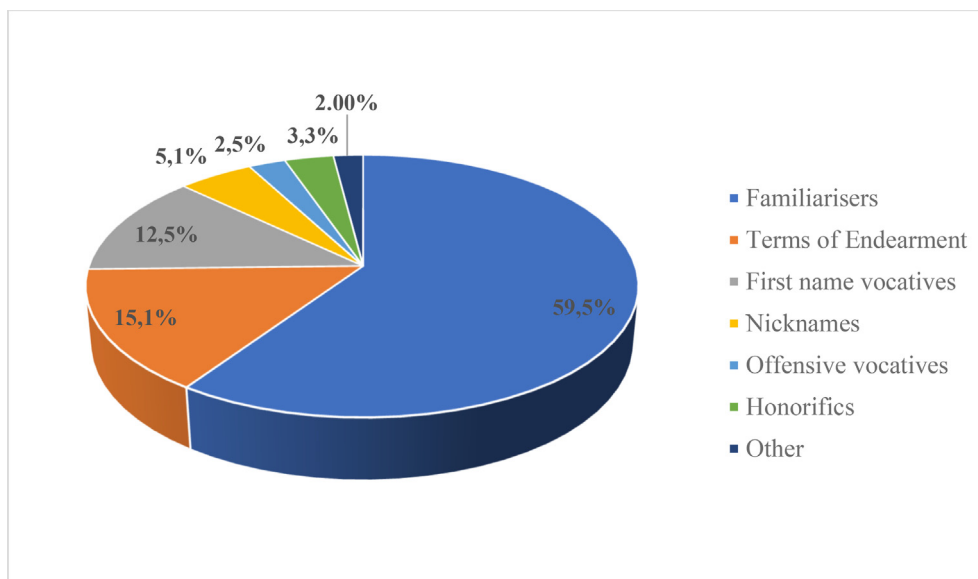


Fig. 1. Main vocative types.

These findings contrast with the figures provided in Biber et al.'s study (2021: 1106) based on the analysis of a sample of c.100,000 words selected from both American and British English conversations, in which first names were the most common of all the categories, at about 65% (in our study they are just 12.5%), followed by familiarisers (15%) (59.5% in our data), kinship terms (10%) (here 0%) and endearments (5%) (here 15.1%). In general conversations, speakers frequently know each other, and thus addressing one's interlocutors by first names or nicknames is common; this is not always the case on Twitter, where many posts are addressed to a general audience and only a few are directed to a particular individual, in which case the symbol @ can be placed directly in front of the person's name (that is, their username). Thus, we can see how, regarding the use of vocatives, there might be significant differences between spontaneous conversations and Twitter discourse, at least in light of the data from the accounts of the five artists here. However, this will have to be confirmed with additional data and analysis.

From the group of familiarisers, the most common, in order of frequency, are *brother* and its multiple spelling variants (*bro*, *brolo*, *brudda(h)*, *bruh(h)*, *bruv*, *blad*, *broski*, *bredda*, *b*), together with *man*, again with its variants (*mann*, *mandem*, *mans*), plus *mate*, *sis(ter)*, *guy(s)*, *girl/gal*, *fam(ily)* and *pal*. The feeling of a close relationship between members of the rap community may account for the high use of the familiarisers *brother*, *sister* and *family* (Barron, 2013; White, 2016; Adams, 2018). Here we can also include *boss*, *boy(bwoy)*, *bud(dy)*, *chile*, *daps* (a shortened form of Dappy), *dude*, *fella(s)*, *friend*, *G*, *geezer*, *kid*, *lad*, *peeps*, *people (ppl)* and *playa (player)*, although the latter do not occur in large numbers. (see Table 3)

**Table 3**  
Most common familiarisers.

Familiariser	Example	N	%
(my)bro and its variants	Keep being u <i>bruv</i> cuz you're amazing as u are. (Dappy, 2018)	87	26.6
man and its variants	Shut up <i>man</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2018)	58	17.7
mate	Hi <i>mate</i> ! I downloaded your new album at the beginning of this week and just heard it once. (Dizzee Rascal, 2020)	42	12.8
guy/guys/you guys	Sorriry I couldn't be in Southampton tonight also <i>guys</i> (Dappy, 2018)	24	7.3
sis/sister	You have a very lonely life. Sort your circle out <i>Sis</i> ! (Ray BLK, 2021)	23	7
lad(s)	Cheer up <i>lad</i> look like hes jus put a knife thru your footy. (Dizzee Rascal, 2020)	10	3.1
fam/family	<i>Fam</i> , I think about the shrimp A LOT. (Ray BLK, 2021)	8	2.5
pal	You were amazing <i>pal</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2021)	5	1.5
bud/ddy	Ta <i>buddy</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2021)	3	0.9
boss	Cheers <i>boss</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2019)	3	0.9
boy	Yes <i>boy</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2018)	3	0.9
dude	People still listening to you <i>dude</i> ? (Dappy, 2018)	3	0.9
people/ppl/p	Loved every single drop of them drops! <i>people</i> if you ain't already I beg you get on her SoundCloud and take them in ❤️👉 (Little Simz, 2020)	3	0.9
Other ( <i>boss, boy, girl, friend, bud(dy), etc.</i> )	<i>Girl</i> , some are just wolves in sheep's clothing. (Ray BLK, 2021)	55	17
<b>Total</b>		<b>327</b>	<b>100</b>

Some of these familiarisers, such as *bro, guy, friend*, are at times preceded by the possessive *my* (12–14) or by the adjective *little, lil* (15).

- (12) They are not ready *my guy*. (Dappy, 2020)  
 (13) 100% agree *my bro*. (Dappy, 2021)  
 (14) Hope you are doing well *my friend*. (Dizzee Rascal, 2021)  
 (15) *Lil bro* be out there telling me'. This trapping shit be like a disease. (Dappy, 2021)

Of the 24 tokens of *guy*, all except two instances are found in the plural, and one third of them occur together with *you*, that is, *you guys*, an address term which seems to be spreading very quickly, not only in conversations (Heyd, 2010) but also in online communication such as Twitter.

- (16) Mh, *you guys* are different. (Little Simz, 2021)

As regards the terms of endearment, *queen(ie)* with 24 tokens, *baby* and its variants (*bab, bae, ba, babygirl, bbe, bby, bay*) with 21 examples, *bestie* with 7, *king* with 6 and *love(ly)* with 5, are by far the most frequent. Other terms found that can be classified within this group are *angel, beauts, boo*,<sup>6</sup> *champ, darling, doll, goddess, hun(ny), legend and sweetheart*. Whereas in general conversation terms of endearment can be used ironically or disparagingly (Landmann, 2021: 2), we did not find any such examples in our sample, although this does not necessarily mean that they cannot convey such a value in this digital genre. (see Table 4)

**Table 4**  
Most common terms of endearment.

Endearment	Example	N	%
<i>queen(ie)</i>	You deserve this and even more <i>queenie</i> . (Ray BLK, 2021)	24	29
<i>baby</i>	Thank u <i>babe</i> . (Ray BLK, 2021)	21	25.3
<i>bestie</i>	I'm here <i>bestie</i> . (Ray BLK, 2021)	7	8.4
<i>king</i>	Thank you so much <i>king</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2018)	6	7.2
<i>love(ly)</i>	Do your thang <i>love</i> !! (Wiley, 2018)	5	6
<i>darling</i>	How was your day <i>darling</i> ? (Ray BLK, 2021)	3	3.6
<i>hun(ny)</i>	Congratulations <i>hunny</i> . (Ray BLK, 2021)	3	3.6
<i>legend</i>	LETS GO <i>LEGEND</i> . (Little Simz, 2021)	2	2.4
<i>champ</i>	And we love you <i>champ</i> . (Little Simz, 2021)	2	2.4
Other ( <i>goddess, boo, doll, angel, etc.</i> )	Have a good day <i>goddess</i> . (Little Simz, 2021)	10	12.1
	Congrats <i>angel</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2018)		
	What people think of you is none of your business. just keep doing you <i>boo</i> . (Ray BLK, 2021)		
<b>Total</b>		<b>83</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>6</sup> *Boo* is defined as a term of endearment referring to a boyfriend, a girlfriend, or a lover. According to the OED, it is of uncertain origin and may be a variant or alteration of another lexical item. It may also derive from *baby* (Green's Dictionary of Slang) or *beau* (Stein, 2001).



The group of first names is next in order of frequency with a total of 69 tokens, these being used mainly by participants in the exchanges to greet, thank, compliment or express full agreement with the artist in question. Here are some examples.

- (17) morning *Dizzee*. (*Dizzee Rascal*, 2021)
- (18) Go *Simz*!! (*Little Simz*, 2021)
- (19) *dizzee* well done to you x. (*Dizzee Rascal*, 2020)

Nicknames occur in similar contexts to those of the previous group, although they are not so frequent, a total of 28 tokens, including forms such as *Raskit(t)*, *Diz*, *Dy*, *Raydum*, *Simbi* and *Simzy*.

- (20) Cheers *Raskit*. (*Dizzee Rascal*, 2020)
- (21) good stuff, *Simbi*. the self doubt is a struggle of mine that I'm also trying to overcome thanks. (*Little Simz*, 2020)

The category of honorific vocatives includes *ma'am/madam*, *sir*, *Mr. Miss*, *lady*, *master*, *don*<sup>7</sup> and *lord*, although their frequency is quite limited (3.3%). They generally show respect towards the addressee, as in (22), although they may also be used as banter or ironically, as in (23).

- (22) Good morning *ma'am* 😊 (*Little Simz*, 2021)
- (23) it's versatility for me *ma'am*, he's evolving everyday and it's beautiful!!! (*Dappy*, 2021)

From the category of offensive address terms, *bitch* (*bia*, *BIA*) is the most common (6 examples), together with *cunt(s)*, *dosser*, *hack(er)*, *pagan*, *hater*, *bastard* and *wanker*, although their overall presence in the posts is in fact very limited, a total of 14 tokens. These are very often accompanied by other swear and taboo expressions, as in the following.

- (24) Wiley didn't invent the Genre you thick *cunts* you are pissing me off. (*Dizzee Rascal*, 2020)

Compared to their use in general conversation (*Palacios Martínez, 2021a*), the frequency of vocatives from this category is far lower in our data. This may have to do with one of the rules imposed by Twitter, that hate speech, abuse and violent threats should be avoided.<sup>8</sup> As is the case with offline spoken English, these taboo vocatives may also lose their insulting nature and serve to express affection among equals or close friends, as in (25), or may even be used sarcastically (26).

- (25) Meet me for a pint when you're down you sexy *bastard* I< adore you. (*Dizzee Rascal*, 2020)
- (26) *Bitch* I'm outside 🌱 (*Ray BLK*, 2021)

#### 4.3. Position in the clause

As noted above, it is important to consider the position of vocatives in the sentence, since this may be closely related to their pragmatic function (*Leech, 1999; McCarthy and O'Keefe, 2003; Clancy, 2015; Biber et al., 2021*). Final position is by far the most common, accounting for 76.3% of all occurrences, some 420 examples. This is followed in frequency by initial position, with 78 tokens (14.2%) (see (26) above), while nominal vocatives in medial position occur in only 40 cases (7.3%). Vocatives in medial position sometimes posed difficulties in terms of classification, and here the criteria established by *Biber et al. (2021:1107)* were followed.<sup>9</sup>

- (27) Big up *bro* for repping our brand. (*Dizzee Rascal*, 2019)

Only 12 address terms of this kind stand on their own as a turn, representing 2.2% of the whole sample (see (4) and (5) above).

<sup>7</sup> *Don* is a Spanish title generally prefixed to a man's forename (OED). Here it is used on its own: "Big up Wiley you don" (*Dappy*, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> For more information, see < <https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter>>.

<sup>9</sup> The nominal vocative was classified as being in medial position when it occurred in the middle of a clause or between C-units and where there was no indication that it might have been more closely associated with one or the other.

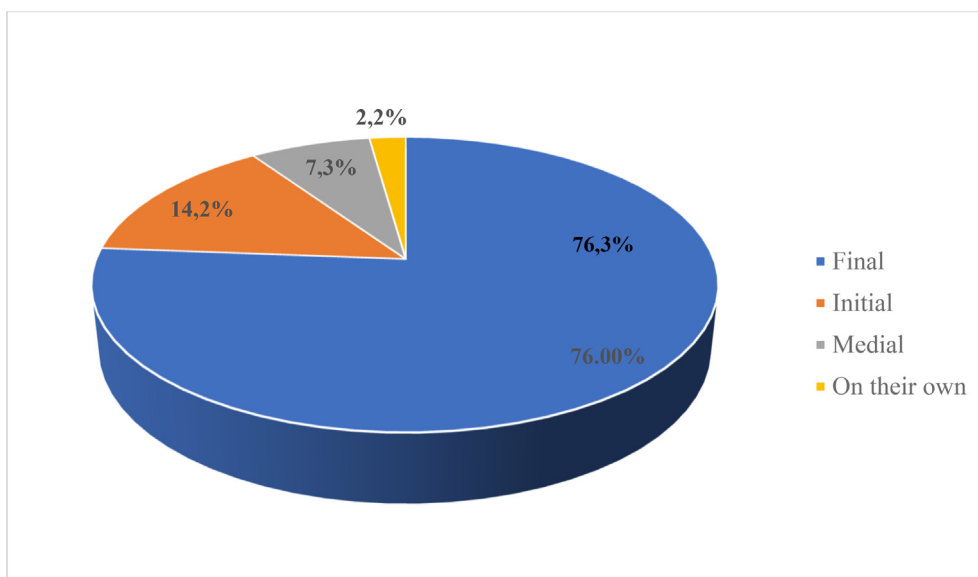


Fig. 2. Vocative position in the clause.

Fig. 2 shows the prevalence of final position over other positions, followed by initial and then medial position. This tendency can be clearly observed across all the categories of nominal vocatives, as also set out in Table 5, below.

The position of nominal vocatives in Twitter discourse does not differ significantly from the norm in spontaneous conversation, where final position also prevails. However, the proportion of vocatives in initial position in Twitter is slightly higher than in offline communication, although the differences here are not substantial.

Table 5  
Position of vocatives according to different types.

	Initial		Medial		Final		On its own		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Familiariser	55	65.5	30	75	240	58	2	16.7	327	59.5
Endearment	3	3.6	2	5	73	17.6	5	41.7	83	15.1
First name	15	17.8	5	12.5	48	11.6	1	8.3	69	12.5
Nick name	3	3.6	–	–	21	5.1	4	33.3	28	5.1
Honorific	2	2.4	–	–	16	3.9	–	–	18	3.3
Offensive	2	2.4	2	5	10	2.4	–	–	14	2.5
Other	4	4.7	1	2.5	6	1.4	–	–	11	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>15.3</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>75.3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>100</b>

In this section we also ask whether there may be a connection between the position of the nominal vocative and the length of the unit in which they occur. This suggestion has already been raised by Biber et al. (2021: 1106), who claim that “initial vocatives tend to be associated with longer units, whereas final vocatives are associated with shorter units”. Our data seem to confirm this tendency, since a high proportion of the vocatives in final position (46.4%) occur in very short posts, that is, in units containing between 1 and 3 words, whereas vocatives in initial position posts tend to occur in longer units. In fact, more than two thirds of nominal vocatives in initial position form part of posts between 4 and 9 words.<sup>10</sup> (Table 6)

<sup>10</sup> G is the initial for *gangster*, equivalent to a friend or guy in African American English (OED). *Geezer* is a dialect pronunciation of *guiser*, a term of derision applied especially to men who are often, but not necessarily, elderly; a chap, fellow (OED). *Peep* is another term for fool (Green’s dictionary of slang) and *playa* from *player* refers to anyone who uses wit, charm or intelligence to gain their objectives, whether honestly or (more usually) dishonestly (Green’s dictionary of slang).

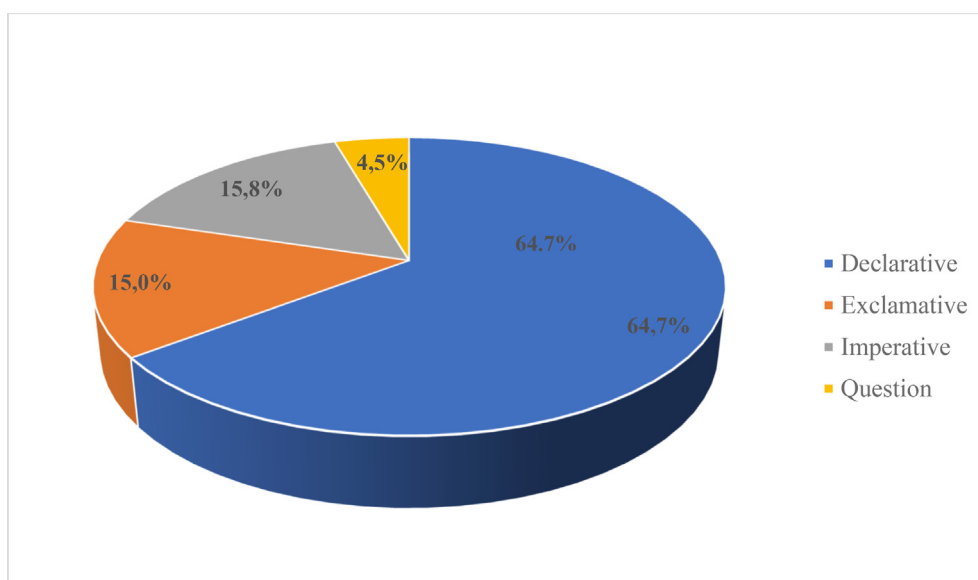
**Table 6**  
Position of nominal vocatives according to the length of posts.

Length of the post (in words)	Initial		Medial		Final		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 to 3 words	9	10.7	6	15	193	46.6	208	38.7
4 to 6 words	34	40.5	13	32.5	160	38.6	207	38.5
7 to 9 words	23	27.4	11	27.5	43	10.4	77	14.3
10 to 12 words	6	7.1	6	15	7	1.7	19	3.5
+13	12	14.3	4	10	11	2.7	27	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>7.4</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>538</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.4. Type of clause and polarity

There is a clear tendency for the nominal vocatives in the sample to occur in declarative sentences, with some 356 such tokens (64.7%). The proportion of vocatives in exclamatives (82 tokens) and imperatives (87 examples) is very similar, 15% and 15.8%, respectively. However, vocatives in questions are not common, with just 25 tokens (4.5%). (see Fig. 3)

(28) How can i send you some music *bro*? (Dizzee Rascal, 2020)



**Fig. 3.** Type of clause.

Negative polarity does not seem to play a significant role in the use of these vocatives, since only 38 (7%) are recorded in negative clauses; out of these 38 cases, 30 occur in declarative negatives and the remaining 8 in imperative negatives. The nominal vocatives in these clauses of negative polarity generally have a mitigating effect, as in (29), to get attention (30), or may even convey emphasis (31).

(29) Sorry I couldn't be in Southampton also tonight *guys*. (Dappy, 2018)

(30) *Geezer* it's not murder. (Wiley, 2018)

(31) n this new year of my life I really don't want the ganja to be a part of it anymore *man*. We just don't go together no mo. (Ray BLK, 2021)

#### 4.5. Pragmatic function

From previous accounts on the pragmatics of vocatives (Leech, 1999; McCarthy and O'Keefe, 2003; Clancy, 2015; Palacios Martínez, 2018; Asprey and Tagg, 2019), a general distinction has arisen between vocatives that perform discourse-related functions and those that serve to express and reinforce interpersonal or relational functions among the participants in an exchange. Discourse-related functions here mainly include attention-getting or focusing, and topic management. Twitter posters use vocatives to attract the attention of rappers or of other participants, sometimes directing their posts to the specific

person they are addressing. In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that Twitter exchanges are not always synchronous, and that posts are very often open, that is, they are addressed to all users, or refer to one particular user in reply to another, previously posted message as part of a conversational exchange or as a means of opening a conversation (Yus, 2011: 140).

The fact that the tweets are not always synchronous, and that they may be addressed either to all users or to one person, means that it is sometimes difficult to follow the conversational thread, and this may also explain why vocatives in Twitter with a focusing function are common, as is indeed the case in other digital genres such as instant communication (Tagg, 2012; Asprey and Tagg, 2019). Readers of the tweets, as Yus claims (2011: 143), must employ a number of inferential strategies for interpretation and processing in that they need to find a referent. Address terms together with indexicals such as pronouns and time adverbs can perform this function.

In addition to such a focusing role in discourse, nominal vocatives may also be used by posters as a linguistic resource to change the topic of the discussion in the thread of tweets, in that a poster might not be interested in or be unsatisfied with the current topic and hence seek to introduce a new viewpoint or even to change what is being discussed. Vocatives can work here as a kind of turning point in the flow of the sequence of tweets.

In the Twitter material analysed here, nominal vocatives that play discourse-related functions amount to only 10.2% of the total, with the first group (attention-getting and focusing) being the more prevalent; only four examples of vocatives (0.7%) were found that served to introduce a new topic. The fact that Twitter posts tend to be short, given the length limitations imposed by this microblogging platform, may account for the secondary role played by vocatives as a topic management resource, in contrast to general conversations, where they have a more prominent role (McCarthy and O'Keefe, 2003; Clancy, 2015; Palacios Martínez, 2018; Biber et al., 2021). (Table 7)

**Table 7**

Main pragmatic functions expressed by nominal vocatives.

PRAGMATIC FUNCTION	N	%	EXAMPLE
<b>I. Discourse-related functions</b>			
Attention-seeking/focusing	52	9.5	<i>Bro</i> I'm gassed and I'm not the guy in the team 😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂 that's mad. (Dizzee Rascal, 2020)
Topic management, change of topic	4	0.7	<i>mate</i> you been tweeting so much about this fight it's like you wanna be the promoter or sumin (Wiley, 2018)
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>10.2</b>	
<b>II. Interpersonal functions</b>			
Compliments, expressing admiration, praise	168	30.5	You're a legend <i>mate</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2020)
Solidarity, camaraderie, support	82	15	Hah a trust e <i>bro</i> . (Wiley, 2018)
Greetings and salutations	74	13.4	Hi <i>Dizzee Rascal</i> I am a music blogger. (Dizzee Rascal, 2020) Cheers <i>mate</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2018)
Agreement	35	6.4	YES <i>BOSS</i> LETS GOO. (Dizzee Rascal, 2020)
Emphasis	22	4	What's he going to prove beating an old man? Fuck off <i>mate</i> . (Wiley, 2018)
Requests	13	2.4	OK <i>bro</i> stop fucking around, bring NDubz back will you. (Dappy, 2020)
Love/affection	13	2.4	I hope 1 day you do a full album with@Ocean I'd be first in the cue <i>baby</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2020)
Humour and badinage	12	2.2	you think I'm leaving you high & dry till September? Nah <i>mate</i> lol. Sign up to my mailing list for exclusives on what's coming next. (Little Simz, 2021)
Mitigation	12	2.2	Nah <i>man</i> , im walking round my gaff singing Lionel Blair song. (Dizzee Rascal, 2020)
Offensive, abusive	8	1.4	Wiley didn't invent the Genre you thick <i>cunts</i> you are pissing me off. (Dizzee Rascal, 2020)
Thanking	6	1.1	<i>Bro</i> thanks for the memories. (Dizzee Rascal, 2018)
Irony	5	0.9	Don't sleep on little simz <i>guys</i> . She is ice cold 🥶🥶 (Little Simz, 2021)
Annoyance	4	0.7	Aint this what have been telling you <i>mans</i> kmt... (Wiley, 2018)
Giving advice	4	0.7	Be careful <i>Mark</i> . They might label you a purist. (Dizzee Rascal, 2019)
Showing respect	2	0.3	Classic album <i>sir</i> (Dizzee Rascal, 2019)
Other (encouragement, making a clarification, combination of some of the above, etc.)	34	6.2	Make that happen <i>lads</i> . (Wiley, 2018) Millions is millions <i>bruh</i> . (Dizzee Rascal, 2019)
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>494</b>	<b>89.8</b>	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>100</b>	

In contrast to discourse-related functions we find interpersonal functions, which are clearly the most frequent here, amounting to almost 90% of cases, and mainly serving to reinforce bonds rather than the communication of new ideas. This is closely related to what Zappavigna (2012: 28) and others (e.g., Malinowski, 2004: 250) have called the phatic communication of microblogging, or what Thompson (2008) describes as *ambient awareness*. Within the class of interpersonal functions, compliments (30.5%), greetings and salutations (13.4%), creating solidarity among the speakers (15%) and the expression of agreement (6.4%) and emphasis (4%) are the most numerous. There are some cases in which a vocative also serves to convey mitigation (2.2%) or even humour and badinage (2.2%).

However, the distinction between one pragmatic function or another is not always as clear-cut as one might expect, in that in some examples we find a combination of humour and irony, and in others greetings and compliments or expressions of affection are conveyed in the same tweet, as in (32) below. There is often an additional problem in the interpretation of these, given the brevity of the messages, limited as they are to >140 characters (increased to >280 in 2017), which means that inferential strategies are required on the part of the reader, as mentioned above (Yus, 2011).

(32) Have a good day *goddess*. (Little Simz 2021)

It can be concluded that position in the clause has a bearing on the pragmatic function conveyed by a vocative: final position is more closely associated with interpersonal functions, while initial position often relates to summoning attention and topic management. This general trend seems to apply to both off- and online communication to a similar degree.

#### 4.6. Gender factor

As described in Section 3, the material analysed was extracted from the accounts of three male and two female rappers. One of the aims was to what extent differences in the use of vocatives could be identified in terms of the gender of posters. This posed an added difficulty in the analysis because, as we have noted earlier, the factor of gender is not always evident on the Twitter platform, since one's gender is not an obligatory element in a poster's online presence. All tweets are associated with a specific Twitter name, account, and an icon that may be a photograph of the user, but may be a different image, or indeed left blank. When clicking on this icon, we might find the user's name or nickname and some other information, such as the place the poster comes from, a slogan, motto, or a short sentence. However, this information varies considerably from one poster to another, and it is not always real, that is, some posters may adopt a different persona or hypothetical identity which bears little relation to reality (Tagg, 2015: 59) and thus verifying personal details is not always possible, including gender. Hence, for the purposes of this paper only the tweets from the selected, identifiably male or female rappers, plus those of the followers whose gender could be verified, were considered in the analysis. The findings reported here should then be taken with caution.

From the 550 nominal vocatives analysed, a total of 216 (39.3%) correspond to the Twitter accounts of the two female artists (Ray Blk and Little Simz), and the remaining 334 (60.7%) were taken from the accounts of the three male rappers (The Dappy, Wiley and Dizzee Rascal).

The analysis of the data here shows some general differences in the use of vocatives. For the female rappers, endearments account for 30.1% of the vocatives used, where for the male artists this is just 5.1% (17 tokens). We may assume, then, that endearments seem to be more closely associated with female users. This was also reported by Asprey and Tagg (2019: 103) in their analysis of private mobile text messages. The category of familiarisers figures prominently in the posts of both the male and female rappers, but is twice as high in the case of the former, that is, 73.3% for male versus 38% for females. This again is in line with previous findings looking at offline communication (Murphy and Farr, 2012). In contrast, first name and nickname vocatives are more commonly used in the accounts of the female than the male rappers, 23.1% versus 14.1%, respectively. This also applies to the group of honorifics, which are more frequent in the female than male accounts, 4.6% versus 2.4%, respectively. By contrast, offensive vocatives are higher in the case of the posts by the male rappers, 3% versus 1.9% for females, although overall numbers are very low here (a total of 14 tokens), so these data are merely suggestive (Table 8).

**Table 8**

Categories of nominal vocatives in the tweets analysed according to gender.

	Fam.		Endearm.		First name		Nickname		Honorific		Offens.		Other		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Female	82	38	66	30.5	35	16.2	15	6.9	10	4.6	4	1.9	4	1.9	216	39.3
Male	245	73.3	17	5.1	34	10.2	13	3.9	8	2.4	10	3	7	2.1	334	60.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>59.5</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>15.1</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>100</b>

The differences identified in terms of the variable of gender are not restricted to varying use of certain categories of nominal vocatives. They are also found in the use of these vocatives within each of the categories analysed. In the group of familiarisers, for example, the vocatives *bro(ther)*, *man*, *brother*, *mate*, *you guys*, *lad(s)* and *fam* are more frequent in posts by the male rappers, while *sister*, *girl*, *man*, *bro* and *you guys* stand out in the posts of the female artists. Something similar can be seen in terms of endearments, where *king*, *champ* and *baby* are used more by males, and *queen*, *baby bestie*, *my love* and *hun(ny)* by females. In the case of the offensive vocatives, *bitch* is the only term used by both male and female rappers in the data; in the case of the former, we also find a far wider variety of other offensive terms, including *cunt*, *dosser*, *pagan*, *bastard* and *wanker*. Turning to the group of honorifics, *Sir*, *Mr.*, *lord* and *don* are attested in the tweets by the male rappers, while *madam*, *lady* and *Miss* occur in female-authored tweets.(Table 9)

**Table 9**  
Most common nominal vocatives according to category and gender.

	Female	N	Male	N
Familiarisers	sis/sister	21	bro	76
	girl	17	man	44
	man	14	mate (you) guys lad(s)	39
	bro	9	fam	15
	(you) guys	9		7
Endearment	queen	24	king	5
	baby	17	champ	2
	bestie (my) love(ly) hun(ny)	7	baby	2
		4		
First name	Ray	5	Dizzee	22
	Simz	19	Dappy	2
Nickname	Simbi	10	Dizz	6
	Raydum	3	Raskit	6
Honorifics	madam	5	Sir	4
	Miss	2	Mr.	2
Offensive	bitch	4	cunt(s)	2
			bitch	2
			dosser	1
			bastard	1
			wanker	1
			hack	1
			hater	1

## 5. Conclusions

A notably high frequency of nominal vocatives was found in a sample of 1500 tweets, in that one third of these posts contained a token. The analysis also revealed that those posting to the Twitter accounts of these rappers make use of a very large and varied repertoire of nominal vocatives, a total of 78 different vocatives excluding variants, and that this is probably even larger than a comparable repertoire found in offline communication (Palacios Martínez, 2018; Biber et al., 2021). There were also cases in which two nominal vocatives cooccurred in the same post, one in initial position and the second one in final position. This may not differ from what could be found in spontaneous conversations, although the particular nature of these Twitter posts, in which the rappers and their followers constitute a close community, should be considered when interpreting the findings here.

As regards the different types of nominal vocatives, familiarisers clearly prevailed over other groups (first names, nicknames, offensive, honorific, etc.), and such a high frequency of familiarisers in this digital genre contrasts to the situation in regular, spontaneous conversations, where first names tend to be the most common (Biber et al., 2021). The fact that the participants in these Twitter exchanges did not all always know each another, and that the mode of communication was not synchronous, may account for this finding. Moreover, the material analysed here was extracted from the accounts of five rappers where the fans and followers of these artists often express their respect, affection, and admiration for the music of these artists. As noted above, the posters in these exchanges can be seen as functioning as a small online community of practice (Tagg, 2015; Adams, 2018) which may lead to the need for participants to reinforce and strengthen their bonds through the use of familiarisers, a recognised element in the phatic communication of microblogging (Malinowski, 2004; Zappavigna, 2012).

In contrast to the high proportion of familiarisers, the number of taboo or offensive vocatives was quite limited, especially compared to what has been reported in general spoken English (Palacios Martínez, 2021a). The restrictions imposed by the Twitter microblogging platform in terms of the need to avoid offensive and abusive language may account for this. Also, given that offensive language here is registered in written form, and can be seen by a potentially large number of people over an open-ended timeframe, may have inhibit posters in what they wrote.

As in spontaneous conversation, vocatives in Twitter generally serve to strengthen social relationships, that is, they have interpersonal pragmatic functions by creating solidarity, complimenting, expressing appreciation, and reinforcing the group identity of the posting community. However, discourse-oriented functions relating to topic and turn management, which are relatively frequent in speech, are not so common here, since the restrictions imposed by Twitter once again constrain the inclusion of long posts and condition the nature of interactions, which, unlike spontaneous conversation, are not completely synchronous. This might be seen as one of the main contributions of this paper to the literature on vocatives, to CMC, and to the discourse related to rap music in general.

Our analysis has shown that some of these vocatives can at times serve to focus on the addressee, this simply to make it clear to whom the post is being directed, through calling attention to that person. Vocatives play an appellative function in this, and generally occur in initial position. In fact, the proportion of vocatives in initial position is as high as in general spoken

discourse, and we can perceive in this the relevance of such a focusing function. Something similar has been reported for other forms of online communication, such as mobile text messages (Asprey and Tagg, 2019).

The position of the vocative in the tweet also seems to relate to the length of these discourse units. The data show that, as in normal conversations, nominal vocatives in final position tend to be short while those in initial position are typically far longer. Polarity, however, does not seem to have a strong influence on nominal vocatives, since these occur with far greater frequency in declarative negatives; only eight cases in our data were recorded with imperative negatives.

In Twitter discourse it is common to find vocatives followed by emojis, emoticons and by creative uses of punctuation, such as repeated letters and exclamation marks, the latter very often serving to further reinforce the meaning conveyed by the vocative (Dainas and Herring, 2021). This is what has been referred in the literature as techniques for the oralisation of the text (Yus, 2011: 147). This issue, while falling outside the scope of the current paper, merits further research. It would be also interesting to explore how address terms in general, and nominal vocatives in particular, interact with these and other features characteristic of Twitter discourse, that is, multimodality, internet abbreviations, lengthening of words, etc. The gender and age of the poster, together with their origins and social background, would also merit further consideration in any subsequent study on address terms, both on this microblogging platform and in other digital genres, although, as mentioned above, methodological issues make these variables difficult to control. More studies are also needed on address terms across the different social media, in that these would serve not only to define address terms further but also to describe these social media in more detail.

The findings and conclusions of this study should be considered preliminary in nature and thus should be treated with caution. The material selected for analysis was restricted to the accounts of five British rappers for a period of two years, and although the body of sample of posts examined can be regarded as fairly large, findings should be confirmed with a greater volume of data over a longer timeframe, and extracted from the accounts of a wider range of rappers and other musicians (Zwicky, 2016).

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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### Appendix

List of nominal vocatives identified in the material studied.

- angel
- auntie
- baby, babe, babs, bae, bay, bbe, bby, baby(girl)
- beautiful, beaubs
- bestie
- bitch, bia, BIA
- boo
- boss
- boy, bwoy
- (my)bredda, bro, brolo, broski, brother, brudda, bruh, bruhh, bruv, bruvva
- bud(ddy)
- champ
- chap
- child
- cunt(s)
- cuz
- daps
- darling
- Diz, Dizz, Dizy, Dizzee, Dizeerascal
- doll
- (my) don
- dosser
- dude, dy

- (tweet) fam(ily)
- Fekky
- fella(s)
- fiend, frend
- (my) G
- (my) girl, gal, gurl, girldem, girl dem
- geezer
- (my) guy(s)
- hack
- hater
- hun(ny)
- hunty
- kids
- king
- king Simby
- lad(s)
- legend
- little Simz
- lord
- (my) love, luv, lovely
- ma'am, madam
- Mahalia
- man, mans, mann, mandem, msn
- Mark
- master
- mate
- Miss
- Mr.
- Mr. Rascal
- pagan
- pal
- peeps
- people, p, ppl
- queen(ie)
- Rascal
- Raskit(t)
- Ray(dum)
- reina
- Sim, Simbi, Simz, Simzy
- sir
- sis(ter)
- Steve
- sweetheart
- Sza
- Uncle Dizzee
- wanker
- Wiley
- woman
- you all
- you girl
- you guys
- you lot
- you Simz
- you two

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**Ignacio M. Palacios Martínez** obtained his Ph.D. in English in 1992 from the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain). Since 1995 he has been working first as Associate Professor and now as Full Professor in the English and German Department of the same university. At present he is the principal investigator of a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education concerned with the language of social media and the digital genres. He was also Head of the University's Modern Language Centre between 2007 and 2010 and Secretary of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies (AEDEAN) from 2004 to 2009. Further information at: <https://www.spertus.es/ignacio.html>