1 **Engaging the public: English local government organisations' social media**

2 **communications during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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9

10 Abstract

11 Communication has played a critical role during the initial response to the COVID-19

12 pandemic, and communicators have had a particularly difficult task in persuading different

13 types of audience to comply with ever-changing regulations. Local government

14 organisations play a crucial role in recontextualising the national messaging for a local

15 audience and encouraging the public to comply with regulations.

16   This paper investigates local government organisations' (henceforth LGOs)

17 engagement strategies in COVID-related posts on social media. In collaboration with LGOs

18 in England, we examined their communication strategies on Twitter and Facebook during

19 the second UK national lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in November-December

20 2020. Using methods from corpus-assisted discourse studies, the paper analyses the

21 occurrence and functions of selected interactive engagement markers, in this case

22 personal pronouns, questions and hashtags. We find that such linguistic features function

23 to encourage engagement by (a) helping to foster relatedness through ambiguity; (b)

24 creating autonomy-supporting communication; and (c) making messages 'stand out'.

25   Based on our corpus analysis, we discuss the initial response of the participating

26   councils to our findings and outline future directions including the integration of

27   multimodal approaches to studying the role of localised social media in national crisis

28   management. We argue for more attention to be paid to the many local communicators

29   who play an invaluable role in encouraging the public to comply with national measures in

30   times of crisis.

31

32   Keywords: *public health campaigns, local government organisations, social media,*

33   *corpus-assisted discourse analysis, metadiscourse*

34

35   1. Introduction

36   Communication has played a critical role during the response to and management of the

37   COVID-19 pandemic. Traditional news media and social media channels represent key

38   sites of information about the local, national and global news, guidance and policies.

39   However, the proliferation of public service and health promotional messages across many

40   channels, and the amplification of real as well as 'fake news', has led to what World Health

41   Organisation (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus labelled as an

42   'infodemic', a phenomenon just as dangerous as the virus itself (WHO, 2020).

43   Ghebreyesus appealed to social media companies, news organisations and governments

44   to help counter the spread of misinformation and help "sound the appropriate level of

45   alarm" (WHO, 2020). This call is not surprising; the success of pandemic crisis

46   management efforts relies primarily on concerted public action where members of the

47   public have to comply with guidance and regulations. Therefore, communication becomes

48   of crucial importance in providing reliable information and influencing public behaviour

49   towards compliance with COVID rules and requirements, for example staying at home

50   during lockdown or getting vaccinated.

51   Any form of strategic communication, including public health campaigns, involves

52   designing clear and persuasive messaging strategies (see Cornelissen, 2020; Gregory,

53   2020). For this purpose, conveying clear information and well-justified arguments for the

54   prescribed measures is important, but alone not sufficient for communicative

55   effectiveness. Communicative entities, such as central governments and local authorities,

56   need also to appear as trustworthy and credible sources of information,[1] and, even more

57   importantly, connect to the specific issues and emotional characteristics of the different

58   audiences.

59   In rhetorical terms, the effectiveness of public health messages is related to several

60   factors. On the one hand, sharing accurate facts and valid arguments remains a crucial

61   factor of persuasion, especially with well-informed and active public audiences (Petty &

62   Cacioppo, 1992). On the other hand, there are various contextual and socio-cultural

63   constraints, such as the increasing amount of public scepticism towards media sources

64   (e.g. fake news) and politicians. Such constraints require strategic communicators to

65   consider the potential impact of both source-related and audience-related factors on the

66   public reception of strategic messages (cf. Bui et al., 2021; Lovari, 2020).

67   The centrality of audience characteristics in determining the choice of message

68   strategies, as well as in evaluating their appropriateness, has been emphasised in public

69   relations, corporate communication and cognate areas (Rawlins, 2014). Previous research

70   on public campaigns has highlighted the diversity of audience characteristics (McGuire,

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[1] In a recent survey, Nielsen et al. (2020) found that people have little confidence in news and information on social media – or indeed other digital platforms – when it comes to COVID-19. Just 9% say that they trust news and information about COVID-19 on social media – with similar figures for video sites (8%), and messaging apps (7%).

71 2013; Parrott, 1995). It is because of this diversity that gaining the audience's engagement

72 is often as (if not more) important as presenting them with compelling reasons to support

73 the advocated standpoint. Achieving an appropriate level of appreciation for the relevance

74 of an issue is a prerequisite for encouraging an audience's critical engagement with the

75 information and arguments that are communicated (Jacobs, 2006).

76 In order to understand how public messaging achieves this aim, it is important to

77 conduct a close examination of previous public science messages, as public campaigners

78 make substantial use of a range of interpersonal strategies to encourage audience

79 engagement, including metadiscourse markers such as pronouns, non-verbal devices (e.g.

80 images) and, in the context of social media, features such as hashtags and emoji (Martin

81 & MacDonald, 2020). However, the close, micro-level analysis of messages on social

82 media remains an under-investigated area within strategic communication research

83 (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2014; Werder, 2015; Palmieri & Mazzali-Lurati, 2021). This paper

84 sets out to examine the language of COVID-related social media posts by local authorities

85 in England, focusing on markers of engagement. The aim of this paper is to report on an

86 initial investigation of how micro-level discourse patterns can work as linguistic indicators

87 of communication strategies intended to minimise negative outcomes for local public

88 health. Therefore, the results constitute the basis for further research aimed at examining

89 these strategies on a larger and broader scale and, ultimately, understanding better the

90 role of localised social media in national crisis management.

91 The specific context chosen for this study is that of local government organisations

92 (henceforth LGOs) in England. These are the county, district, borough and city councils

93 "responsible for a range of vital services for people and businesses in defined areas" (LGA,

94 2022). LGOs constitute an ideal terrain for investigating engagement strategies with

95 complex audiences; indeed, socio-demographic factors, cultural and personality traits,

political leaning, personal experience with COVID-19, reading and information comprehension and risk aversion behaviour have all been found to influence people's perception of risk, trust and, consequently, their willingness to comply with government guidance (Coleman et al., 2020).[2] Clearly, navigating these complex audiences is an extremely hard task for any communication team, in particular when asking the public to change their behaviour to the extent necessary to reduce the spread of an airborne virus. The broad aim of this work is to better understand how English LGOs tackled that challenge.

The attention to LGOs is warranted for several reasons. Firstly, they play an important role during national crises. As the WHO (2009) have noted, these organisations act as 'translators' of central government communications, in the sense of localising the national messages and helping local residents to make sense of government communication. Due to their knowledge of local dynamics, these organisations are able "to provide services in a way people need (and) likely to have a substantially better outcome than through a top-down restrictive framework" (House of Commons, 2009). Secondly, LGOs seem to enjoy much higher levels of public trust. The period before the pandemic has already been characterised by decreasing levels of public trust, and specifically distrust in national level government and leadership (Edelmann, 2020; Enria et al., 2020). This trend was also evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when, for example, people were more likely to trust messages coming from their local council than from the national government (Coleman et al., 2020). Despite the evident importance of

[2] In the "Pandemic and its public report", Coleman and colleagues have found six distinct types of population groups differing in their attitudes, experience and behaviour (p. 5): (1) Individualist risk-takers (12% of the population); (2) Non-information-seeking sceptics (19% of the population); (3) Information-seeking rule-followers (21% of the population), (4) The complacently confident (19% of the population); (5) Information-seeking critics (16% of the population); (6) The experientially risk-averse (12% of the population).

117   local government communications, scholarly attention has thus far prioritised national

118   messaging (e.g. Gherheş et al., 2023; Lovari, 2020; Williams & Wright, 2022).

119

120 ## 2. Literature Review

121 ### 2.1 Trust and Compliance

122 The persuasive effect of public communication is extremely complex. Public health

123 campaigns in general have the difficult task of influencing resistant audiences, and, as

124 evidence shows, conventional public health campaigns have limited direct effects on

125 health behaviours, although they may exert "moderate to powerful" influence on thinking

126 (Atkin, 2012: 13). However, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, having an influence

127 merely on thinking has simply not been sufficient; early in the pandemic, the public's active

128 compliance (i.e. change in behaviour) was predicted to be critical to the success of

129 measures brought in to overcome the crisis (Finset et al., 2020). Topics including the

130 complexity of communication aims (with an articulated focus on gaining public

131 compliance), the importance of trustworthiness and ability to engage with complex

132 audiences have already generated considerable research interest.[3] In the below review of

133 existing scholarship, there emerge two particular lines of research: one that examines

134 trust and behavioural influence of COVID-related public health communication and

135 another that focusses on specific communication strategies.

136 Among the emerging scholarship on COVID-related public health communication,

137 examination of perceived risk, trust and consequent public behaviour are key themes. In

138 their comprehensive report, Coleman et al. (2020, pp. 33-47) report on how different

139 groups within the UK public trusted and responded to official guidance on COVID-19 (see

140 footnote 2). What seemed to have been an influential factor in terms of trust was the

141 source of information: people were more likely to trust information when it came to them

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[3] Two projects keep an up-to-date list of emerging scholarship: see
https://c19comms.wp.horizon.ac.uk/references/ and
https://pandemicandbeyond.exeter.ac.uk/projects/knowing-the-pandemic-communication-information-and-experience/

142 from scientific resources such as the National Health Service (NHS), the World Health

143 Organisation (WHO) or healthcare professionals (over 88%), or local organisations (72%)

144 than from the national government (63%). In terms of the content of messages, 70% of

145 respondents thought that there was a conflict between government and scientific advice,

146 and 73% thought that government messages were too vague. A closer look at the different

147 types of public audiences gives a more refined picture. For example, 90% of people classed

148 as 'information-seeking critics' (characterised by an 'entrenched suspicion of official

149 advice') found messages too open to interpretation, compared to only 50% of those

150 labelled as 'information-seeking rule followers'.[4] Apart from drawing attention to the

151 general lack of trust in government advice, this report further highlights the importance of

152 communication strategies that engage with specific audiences (see also Section 2.2).

153   Academic studies provide an overview of the complex relationship between trust,

154 audience and communication in a range of geo-political contexts, such as Singapore

155 (Wong & Jensen, 2020), the UK (Enria et al., 2020; Williams & Wright, 2022), Italy (Lovari,

156 2020), Sweden (Irwin, 2020), China (Zhang et al., 2020), Australia and New Zealand (Bui

157 et al., 2021) and the Netherlands (van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). Lovari's (2020) study of the

158 Italian Health Ministry's communication focuses on social media; it is especially relevant

159 to the present study because of the parallels in terms of the deep distrust in public

160 institutions, combined with the public's growing demand for information both in Italy and

161 the UK. Lovari (2020) examined how the Italian Health Ministry turned to social media,

162 specifically Facebook, to counter the spread of misinformation. The strategies identified

163 include giving voice to influencers, using hashtags, calling out fake news and explaining

164 measures through data and visuals. Lovari concluded that, in a period of extreme

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[4] For more information about the different types of publics please see Coleman et al. (2020).

165 uncertainty, public health organisations' use of social media in a transparent, strategic

166 and proactive manner is fundamental to increasing trust.

167   Another extreme case of trust in public organisations was studied by Irwin (2020),

168 who examined public communications and international media coverage of the

169 uncommonly liberal pandemic strategy in Sweden, focusing in part on the perception of

170 high levels of trust. Irwin (2020) found that the policies in Sweden were not so different to

171 those in other countries, but what differed was the language and rhetoric relating to the

172 role of social media in the interpretation and ratification of (mis)information. Another

173 example is van Dijck and Alinejad (2020) who – in the Dutch context – reflected on the

174 role of social media in the health crisis and called for a greater understanding of the dual

175 role of social media in both undermining and enhancing public trust, as well as of the

176 importance of developing distinct communication strategies for different aspects of

177 informing and debating with the public.

178   The above studies seem to present a unified view about the importance of tailoring

179 communications to the needs of various public audiences to gain their trust. Engagement

180 is key in this process because it enhances confidence in the authorities' ability to manage

181 the situation, as opposed to unresponsive, non-transparent communication that leads to

182 the erosion of trust (Enria et al., 2020).

183

184 2.2 Communication Strategies

185 In terms of communication strategies, several researchers have reviewed existing

186 scholarship on COVID-related official communication and/or historical public health

187 communication to provide evidence of, and propose, effective communication strategies.

188 The strategies that are most often described as effective in the research include:

- tailoring messages to the specific audience and fostering relatedness between the public and the source of the message (feeling cared for by others, trusted and understood) (Malecki et al., 2020; Porat et al., 2020; Power & Crosthwaite, 2022; Ratzan et al., 2020; Stolow et al., 2020);
- empathic, compassionate communication (Finset et al., 2020; Malecki et al., 2020; Bui, Moses & Dumay, 2021);
- acknowledging uncertainty (Finset et al., 2020; Porat et al., 2020; Ratzan et al., 2020; Wong & Jensen, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020);
- fostering autonomy (Habersaat et al., 2020; Porat et al., 2020; McGlaughlin et al., 2023; Williams & Wright, 2022);
- cutting through the 'infodemic' (Finset et al., 2020; Ratzan et al., 2020).

These findings suggest that, to achieve public compliance, communicators need to balance factual information with actions that address the relationship between communicator and audience, for example by communicating at strategically relevant times through:

a) source-related strategies, which aim to emphasise the legitimacy of the information by communicating trustworthiness and confidence in the science behind the advice;

b) audience-related strategies, which aim to encourage autonomy, relatedness and empathy.

For example, McGlaughlin et al. (2023) conducted a survey of the UK public's response to various COVID-related public health messages, finding that messaging perceived to be effective provides "a clear rationale for adhering to measures and a means for the public to take personal responsibility to contribute to managing the virus" (p. 14).

213   Many of the studies listed above and those mentioned in Section 2.1 are similar in

214   that their engagement with communication strategies remains at a 'macro' level; while

215   they provide a broad overview of the strategies of communicators, they do not draw upon

216   systematic and rigorous analyses of individual linguistic patterns. While there is some

217   acknowledgement of the importance of specific linguistic and discourse strategies (Finset

218   et al, 2020; Habersaat et al., 2020; Porat et al, 2020; Bui et al, 2021), discussion of micro-

219   level linguistic strategies is largely absent from the literature. For example, Lovari (2020)

220   notes that the Italian Health Ministry's messages contained emoticons, infographics, and

221   integrated specific words like *falso* (false) but does not explore in detail these broad

222   observations (p. 460). The exceptions to this include the studies by Gelmini et al. (2021),

223   Power & Crosthwaite (2022) and Williams & Wright (2022). Gelmini et al. (2021), for

224   example, combined the examination of rhetorical appeals with discourse analytical

225   approaches to explore COVID-related corporate communication in Italy, while Williams &

226   Wright (2022) analysed a corpus of televised briefings from the British government,

227   criticising politicians' strategies for minimising their own responsibility for ending the

228   pandemic and maximising the responsibility of the public.

229   Overall, however, we can say that a number of the observations about language,

230   such as references to "provocative" (Stolow et al., 2020, p. 531) or "simple" language

231   (Finset et al., 2020, p. 874), for example, lack linguistic precision, and advice given about

232   language use such as "the discourse of crisis, panic and war", "gain-frame" or positive

233   language (Haberstaat et al., 2020, p. 683) lack the specifics that would help professional

234   communicators to apply the advice in practice. Furthermore, much of the existing research

235   on crisis communications in the context of COVID-19 concerns messaging at a national

236   level (e.g. Power & Crosthwaite, 2022; Williams & Wright; 2022). Therefore, the aims of

237   this paper are (a) to contribute to a growing body of knowledge based on detailed accounts

238 of linguistic practices, drawing on empirical data observation of micro-level linguistic

239 patterns, and (b) to explore COVID-related crisis communications at a local rather than

240 national level, investigating how linguistic patterns of engagement may contribute to the

241 communicative goals of English LGOs. As the above review has shown, engagement with

242 a range of audiences and strategic communication are central to achieving trust and public

243 action; therefore, understanding the factors that influence the perception of and

244 engagement with public health measures is key for developing effective interventions in

245 future global crises (cf. Parrott, 1995).

246

247 2.3 Engagement in Discourse

248 The interactions between writers and readers, and specifically the strategies that writers

249 use to engage audiences, have been studied in a variety of contexts, such as academic

250 writing (Hyland, 2005a), corporate discourse (Hyland, 1998) or online consumer review

251 discourse (Vásquez, 2014). In language-oriented scholarship, these strategies are

252 commonly referred to as involvement strategies and include resources that encourage

253 interaction between writers and their audiences, and encompass ways in which writers

254 connect with, express concern for, and direct the attention of, their readers (see e.g.

255 Vásquez, 2014). Hyland (2017) refers to these strategies as *metadiscourse,* a concept that

256 describes the language that writers use to help readers interpret the intended function of

257 the message. Metadiscourse links a text to its context by using language designed for

258 readers' needs, understandings, existing knowledge and prior experiences with texts. In

259 applying this concept to the pandemic context, metadiscourse strategies can be said to

260 be clearly very important in pandemic-related health messaging (as discussed in Section

261 2.2), serving as a "recipient design filter" (Hyland, 2017, p. 17) that allow messages to be

262 tailored to specific audiences in order to foster relatedness and encourage autonomy.

In Hyland's model, there are two broad categories of metadiscourse: interactive elements, whose main function is to guide the reader's attention through the text, and interactional elements that aim to involve the audience in the text (Hyland, 2005). For the present study, we have chosen to study a selection of interactional features that foster engagement between writers and the audience and feature in short texts typical of social media. While we acknowledge that a wide range of discursive devices may also serve as engagement markers, our study specifically focuses on:

- personal pronouns, which are considered as markers of linguistic strategies for engaging multiple voices and communicating trustworthiness (e.g. Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2014; Palmieri & Mazzali-Lurati, 2021)
- questions, which have been shown to function to engage readers through dialogue and may directly influence judgement and behaviour (e.g. Lai & Farbrot, 2014; Moore et al., 2012);
- hashtags, which have been studied as linguistic instruments for engaging readers in discussion of public and societal relevance (Greco, 2023) and shown to take on interpersonal functions as markers of engagement (e.g. Lovari, 2020; Zappavigna, 2018).

Although these features do not represent the full range of known metadiscourse strategies, our study aims to focus on these features as a window through which to observe some of the patterns of use and communicative functions of engagement strategies in pandemic-related communications by local government organisations.

285   3. Methodology

286   3.1 Data Collection

287   Social media posts from five English LGOs were collected and examined for this

288   preliminary study. The LGOs were: Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council;[5]

289   Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council;[6] Oldham Council;[7] Stockport Metropolitan

290   Borough Council;[8] and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.[9] In collaboration

291   with the communication teams of these LGOs, all posts from the Facebook and Twitter

292   accounts of these organisations for the period 5 November - 2 December, 2020 (inclusive)

293   were gathered, representing the period in which England was in its second national

294   lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic.[10] The selection of participating organisations was

295   necessarily opportunistic; a call was put out through a local government communications

296   consultant, and those authorities that responded positively in time for inclusion in the

297   study were accepted. These organisations differ both in size and social demographic, but

298   this can be considered an advantage, as it provides an (albeit small-scale) insight into a

299   variety of English constituencies; Blackburn, Oldham and Stockport are located in the

300   north of England, while Bournemouth and Windsor are located in the south.

301   The data were provided by the communication teams of the LGOs, who consented

302   on behalf of their authorities to the use of their posts for research purposes. Both the

303   Facebook and Twitter posts were posted on public channels and are openly accessible to

304   the public. Posts created by private individuals were not gathered; consequently, privacy

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[5] https://www.blackburn.gov.uk/

[6] https://www.bcpcouncil.gov.uk/

[7] https://www.oldham.gov.uk/

[8] https://www.stockport.gov.uk/

[9] https://www.rbwm.gov.uk/

[10] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54763956

305 and ethics concerns related to private individuals did not apply (Ahmed et al., 2017). The

306 collection of the data from the social media sites was completed manually, in some

307 instances by the councils' communications teams, or otherwise by the research team,

308 foregoing any issues related to automatic scraping (Williams et al., 2017). LGOs who

309 gathered their own data manually were instructed to provide every post published within

310 the specified period, so as to match the collection procedure of the research team, which

311 was to gather all posts and subsequently eliminate those that were not related to COVID-

312 19.

313 When preparing the data for analysis, the criterion for inclusion of individual posts

314 in the study was the presence of one or more explicit (or clearly implied) references to

315 COVID-19. Explicit reference to COVID-19 was observed through direct mention of the

316 terms *COVID-19, COVID* and *Coronavirus*. Implicit reference was judged qualitatively on

317 the basis of posts which contained indirect contextual cues, but did not explicitly mention

318 COVID-19, such as *virus, pandemic, social distancing, government guidelines, lockdown,*

319 *uncertain times* and *difficult times*. Posts that did not refer to COVID-19 (either explicitly

320 or implicitly) were excluded from the dataset. In taking this approach, we acknowledge

321 that reference alone to COVID-19 (whether explicit or implicit) does not guarantee that

322 the topic (or 'aboutness', Scott & Tribble, 2006) of a text is centred on the referenced

323 concept, as it is possible that a single reference to COVID-19, for instance, may occur in

324 texts that are ostensibly 'about' a different topic. However, due to the relatively short

325 length of the texts in this study (compared to other commonly analysed texts in corpus-

326 assisted discourse studies, such as news articles, for example), it was deemed that even

327 one reference to COVID-19 within a short social media post would very likely indicate that

328 the post is in some way relevant to the topic in question.

329   Only posts that originated from the councils' social media accounts were gathered,

330 thus excluding posts from other accounts that may have been 'shared' (on Facebook) or

331 'retweeted' (on Twitter) by the council accounts. In doing so, it is important to

332 acknowledge that some discursive strategies, as evidenced in the sharing of posts from

333 other accounts (see e.g. McEnery et al., 2015), may be omitted from the analysis; however,

334 in order to comment on the councils' own engagement strategies, it was necessary to

335 isolate the linguistic content that was authored by council staff. The number and type of

336 posts, as well as the scale of engagement, are summarised in Table 1.[11]

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[11] We observed differences in the ratio of pandemic and non-pandemic related posts. For example, of the 47 Twitter posts published by Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, 37 were COVID-related (79%), while Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council published 28 COVID-related tweets out of the 97 during the examined period (29%); however, all 82 tweets posted by Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council during this period related to COVID-19 (100%).

337 Table 1. Frequency of posts and total words gathered from the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the participating councils and their

338 followerships (followership recorded in June, 2021).

Council	Facebook sub-corpus			Twitter sub-corpus		
	Username (followers)	Posts	Words	Username (followers)	Posts	Words
Blackburn	@BlackburnDarwenCouncil (15,366)	41	5,784	@blackburndarwen (15,200)	28	1,117
Bournemouth	@MyBCPCouncil (51,185)	63	5,419	@BCPCouncil (30,900)	37	1,710
Oldham	@loveoldham (24,876)	58	3,142	@OldhamCouncil (26,400)	144	6,611
Stockport	@StockportMBC (24,937)	98	4,306	@StockportMBC (27,200)	82	3,361
Windsor	No data received	0	0	@RBWM (17,400)	36	1,565
Total		260	18,651		327	14,424

339

3.2 Analytical Approach

The analysis was conducted using methods from corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), an approach that, broadly speaking, combines the quantitative elements of corpus linguistics with the qualitative elements of discourse analysis. The use of corpus linguistics in discourse studies (i.e. CADS) allows access to repeating discourse patterns via the extraction of frequency-based data, which is then analysed and interpreted qualitatively by the researcher; this approach is discussed by Baker (2006), for example, who provides a general introduction, and Taylor and Marchi (2018), who provide a critical review of recent developments in CADS. Such approaches have been applied to social media data (e.g. Rüdiger & Dayter, 2020; Zappavigna, 2012) and have been used to examine language in the context of COVID-related public communications (e.g. Williams & Wright, 2022).

The corpus analysis was conducted using *AntConc* (version 3.5.9; Anthony, 2020), a freeware corpus analysis toolkit that is well-suited to handling small datasets such as the corpus investigated in this study. *AntConc* was used firstly to search for strings that correspond with the engagement markers included in our study (discussed in Section 2.3); these search terms are listed in Table 2.

Then, the relative frequency of these terms was normalised to a basis of 10,000. Rather than using a basis of one million, which is common in corpus linguistics, a basis of 10,000 avoids artificially inflating the frequency of features relative to the size of the corpus in this study (Brezina, 2018: 43). Relative frequency was used to inform the selection of individual terms for further, qualitative exploration, with a preference for the most commonly occurring terms. This step involved the extraction of all concordance lines of a given term as occurring in both sub-corpora, and the manual examination and categorisation of the examples in a spreadsheet. The task of qualitative coding was shared

365 equally among the three co-authors with regular review and discussion of each other's'

366 coding decisions. The specific categorisation schemes employed vary according to the

367 terms in question; these are discussed in Section 4.

368

369 Table 2. Engagement marker categories and search terms investigated in the study.

Engagement marker	Search terms
Personal pronouns (including possessive pronouns and determiners)	First person: *I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, ours* Second person: *you, your, yours* Third person: *he, him, his, she, her, hers, it, its, they, them, their, theirs*
Questions[12]	\?
Hashtags[13]	\#

370

371 Following the analysis, we then presented our findings to representatives from the

372 participating local government organisations and held a focus group to discuss their

373 response and feed forward to the next phase of the project. While it is likely that a close

374 observation of data, limited to five research partners, may not yield widely generalisable

375 results, our approach in this study is, nonetheless, to provide an initial overview of some

376 of the discursive engagement strategies in the context of English LGOs. Importantly, the

377 identification of these strategies and their patterns of occurrence may provide a source

378 for the further exploration of possible causative relationships between message and

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[12] Questions were accessed through the retrieval of all question marks in the data, rather than searching for interrogative structures. Therefore, we acknowledge that questions that do not make use of question marks are omitted from our analysis. Question marks were searched as escaped characters using regular expressions.
[13] Hashtags were searched as escaped characters using regular expressions.

379   action (for further argument see Grieve, 2021). Following the discussion of our initial

380   findings in Section 4, and the response of the participating organisations in Section 5, we

381   discuss – in Section 6 – how this study will inform the next phase of our work.

382

383   4 Findings and Discussion

384   This section presents the analysis of the engagement markers under investigation,

385   starting with overall frequency data (Section 4.1) and then describing the qualitative

386   analysis of some of the most frequently occurring terms for each engagement marker type:

387   personal pronouns and possessive determiners (Sections 4.2.1-4.2.3), questions (Section

388   4.2.4) and hashtags (Section 4.2.5).

389

390   4.1 Frequency Data

391   Table 3 shows the frequency of each of the search terms in the Facebook and Twitter sub-

392   corpora. For each engagement marker type, the broad distribution of frequency is similar

393   for both Facebook and Twitter sub-corpora, with the exception of the hashtag, which is

394   notably more frequent for the Twitter data; this is expected, as the modern usage of the

395   hashtag as a linguistic meta-tag originated on – and is most closely associated with –

396   Twitter, but has spread to other social media sites including Facebook (Zappavigna, 2018).

397   We refer to the frequency data in Table 3 throughout our analysis in Section 4.2.

398   Table 3. Frequency data for each engagement marker category.

Engagement marker	Search term	Facebook sub-corpus		Twitter sub-corpus	
		Frequency	Relative frequency (per 10,000)	Frequency	Relative frequency (per 10,000)
Personal pronouns (including possessive pronouns and determiners)	*you*	377	202.13	298	206.60
	your	196	105.09	161	111.62
	we	153	82.03	109	75.57
	our	126	67.56	94	65.17
	it	86	46.11	57	39.52
	they	46	24.66	40	27.73
	them	32	17.16	18	12.48
	their	32	17.16	10	6.93

us	29	15.55	11	7.63
I	16	8.58	8	5.55
its	10	5.36	1	0.69
my	6	3.22	3	2.08
she	6	3.22	0	0.00
he	5	2.68	4	2.77
her	5	2.68	0	0.00
me	3	1.61	0	0.00
his	1	0.54	3	2.08
mine	0	0.00	0	0.00
ours	0	0.00	0	0.00
yours	0	0.00	2	1.39

	him	0	0.00	1	0.69
	hers	0	0.00	0	0.00
	theirs	0	0.00	0	0.00
Questions	*?*	45	24.13	30	20.80
Hashtags	*#*	167	89.54	259	179.56

399

400   4.2 Corpus-assisted discourse analysis

401   The analysis begins by analysing three major categories of personal reference: second

402   person, first person plural and first person singular.

403

404   4.2.1 Second person pronouns and agentivity

405   The second person pronoun *you* is by far the most frequently-occurring personal pronoun

406   in the corpus (see Table 3). The importance of *you* in creating engagement has been well

407   documented in health communication (Chang, 2011; Parrott 1995) and social media

408   advertising (Lai & Farbrot, 2014). In analysing the use of *you*, we examined the following

409   features:

410   • the clause type (*declarative, exclamative, imperative, interrogative* and *conditional*

411   *dependent clause*);

412   • the framing operated by the clause (*action/event/situation* and *subject/object*);

413   • the overarching communicative aim of the whole posted message – in public health

414   communication scholarship and practice there is a distinction between persuasive

415   and informative communicative goals (Atkin & Rice, 2012). Following the close

416   reading and analysis of a sample of our data, we inductively specified further goals

417   within the persuasive category to capture the strength of the deontic modality of

418   the message: *advise, encourage, inform, instruct, order*.

419   As shown in Table 4, The great majority of clauses containing *you* are declaratives,

420   followed by conditional dependent clauses, imperatives, interrogatives and exclamatives.

421   As for the communicative aim of the posted message (Table 5), ordering prevails, followed

422   by instructing, encouraging , informing and advising.

423

424   Table 4. Frequency data for clause type containing *you*.

Clause type	Facebook sub-corpus		Twitter sub-corpus	
	Frequency	Relative frequency (per cent)	Frequency	Relative frequency (per cent)
declarative	241	65.49	180	62.71
conditional (dependent clause)	82	22.28	76	26.48
interrogative	21	5.71	10	3.48
imperative	19	5.16	20	6.97
exclamative	5	1.36	1	0.35
TOTAL	368	100	287	100

425

426   Furthermore, out of 318 posts aimed at directing and giving orders (across both

427   sub-corpora), only 15 are expressed with imperative clauses, while the majority (224) are

428   declaratives, followed by conditionals (75). Therefore, the public authorities seem to

429   favour a communicative style that is at the same time official/formal and non-paternalistic

430   This means favouring strategies that can be described in terms of negative politeness

431   (Brown & Levinson, 1987); compared to imperatives, which may be perceived as explicitly

432   imposing on the reader's freedom of choice, declaratives and conditionals leave the reader

433   space for individual decision-making and minimise interference with "the addressee's

434   freedom of action" (Brown & Levinson, 2006: 317). This contributes to the framing of local

435   authorities as reliable and expert sources of information and directions rather than merely

436   promotional agents.

437   Table 5. Frequency data for communicative aim of clause containing *you*.

Communicative aim	Facebook sub-corpus		Twitter sub-corpus	
	Frequency	Relative frequency (per cent)	Frequency	Relative frequency (per cent)
order	161	43.75	157	54.70
instruct	99	26.90	44	15.33
encourage	62	16.85	41	14.29
inform	34	9.24	31	10.80
advise	12	3.26	14	4.88
TOTAL	368	100.	287	100

438

439   The prevailing use of declaratives may compromise audience engagement

440   compared to using other types of clauses, such as imperatives and exclamatives. Yet, the

441   use of conditionals and interrogatives, which together represent 29% of instances of *you*

442   across both sub-corpora, indicates that an attempt to engage the readers is present.

443   Indeed, conditional clauses are useful for selecting specific audience groups, attracting

444   their attention and creating a sense of involvement. For example, in Extract 1 shows,

445   readers are invited to verify whether they belong to the category at issue and, if so, to

446   follow the advocated order (compare with observations in Section 4.2.4).

447

448   Extract 1

449   *If you are told to self-isolate you must go home immediately ▮ Only leave your*

450   *home to go for a test and do not stop self-isolating until you have been given the*

451   *all clear. This is to stop the spread of #coronavirus*

452   (Oldham Council, 28 November 2020, Twitter)

453

454 Furthermore, this demonstrates a strategy of synthetic personalisation that is compatible

455 with the mass-mediated nature of the social media post; the use of *you* simulates a

456 personalised messaging style that encourages engagement by giving an "impression of

457 treating each of the people 'handled' *en masse* as an individual" (Fairclough, 2001: 52)..

458   As for interrogatives, the questions asked by the writers appear to be intended to

459 (a) stir the curiosity or attention of the audience, inviting them to engage with the content

460 of the post, and (b) personalise the message to the expectation of specific individual

461 readers. Interestingly, the most frequent communicative aim of the posts containing

462 interrogatives is to encourage action (discussed further in Section 4.2.4).

463   Clauses containing *you* put the active role of the readers in the foreground,

464 assigning them responsibility. Among the declaratives, actions in which *you* is the subject

465 dominate. A frequent pattern (50.36% of all 421 *you*-subject declaratives in the corpus) is

466 the use of modal auxiliaries with deontic function (e.g. *you should*, *you must*), almost

467 exclusively when referring to actions mandated by COVID-related rules. Of these, the

468 majority (79.25%) order or permit affirmative action (e.g. "Despite national restrictions,

469 you can still exercise outdoors"), while examples of explicit prohibition via negation (e.g.

470 "You must not meet socially indoors with family or friends") are relatively rare (20.75%).

471 This can be interpreted as an autonomy-facilitating strategy whereby LGOs attempt to

472 remind readers of the freedoms that remain, despite the restrictions in place. There is a

473 low frequency of advising compared to encouragements, where the former entails

474 responsibility on the writer while the latter shifts responsibility on the reader.

475   Taken as a whole, the posts containing *you* appear to be structured in such a way

476   to make the readers responsible and interested (cf. Chang 2011) in the post while allowing

477   the writers to maintain an image consistent with the ethos of a public authority.

478

479   4.2.2 First person plural pronouns and inclusivity

480   In both the Facebook and Twitter sub-corpora, *we* is the second most frequently used

481   personal pronoun, behind *you*. In political discourse, *we* has been identified as one of the

482   most widely used discursive resources to perform inclusion (e.g. Jaworska & Sogomonian,

483   2019). This is unsurprising – *we* is a notoriously ambiguous pronoun; it has meanings that

484   can be categorised broadly as *exclusive* or *inclusive*. Exclusive usage refers only to the

485   writer (and the people they represent, e.g. "We'd love to hear your stories"). Inclusive

486   usage is, in our analysis, categorised into three types: *general* (referring to all people, e.g.

487   "We must follow the latest national restrictions"), *local* (referring to the writer and the

488   reader(s) only, e.g. "These shops will only survive if we continue to spend locally") (see

489   Darics & Koller, 2019), and *pseudo 2nd person*. Pseudo 2nd person usage occurs when

490   *we* refers to the reader(s) only and not the writer – this usage does not refer to the writer

491   but instead implies a command (cf. Lammers, 2001 quoted in Van de Mieroop, 2009). We

492   coded instances as pseudo 2nd person when it was clear from elsewhere in the tweet that

493   the command is actually addressed to the audience (e.g. "<u>We</u> all have a responsibility to

494   stop the spread of Coronavirus. Remember to: Wash <u>your</u> hands regularly"). The

495   exclusive/inclusive distinction can also be applied to *us* and *our*. The ambiguity of the

496   pronominal referent may be used as a strategy to share responsibility for managing the

497   pandemic with the public (cf. Williams & Wright, 2022) and mitigate the directness of the

498   command.

499   In the corpus data, inclusive usage of *we* comprises the majority of instances of *we*

500   in both the Facebook and Twitter sub-corpora (58% and 65%, respectively). The pronoun

501   *us* occurs much less frequently (29 times and 11 times in the Facebook and Twitter sub-

502   corpora, respectively); among these instances, inclusive usage of *us* accounts for 11

503   instances (38%) on Facebook and 6 instances (55%) on Twitter. The third type of 1st

504   person plural reference we investigated, possessive determiner *our*, is used inclusively

505   more on Facebook (52%) but relatively less on Twitter (46%).

506   The predominance of the inclusive usage of *we* and, to a lesser extent, *us* and *our*,

507   clearly demonstrates the effort from councils to create a sense of inclusivity, even in

508   instances where the pronoun refers primarily to the audience and not the writer (pseudo

509   2nd person) in the guise of a command or order. The ambiguity of the pronoun is an

510   advantage here, used to amplify the sense of inclusion and shared experiences: on the

511   one hand, messages may include several 1st person pronouns with different referents; on

512   the other hand, some pronoun usage is ambiguous by itself, as exemplified in Extract 2.

513

514   Extract 2

515   [...] *so we urge residents to continue to work with us and do everything they can to*

516   *help stop the spread of the virus. Please stay at home as much as possible and*

517   *don't mix with people you don't live with. This awful situation will only go on longer*

518   *if people break the rules, risking further spread of the virus and causing more*

519   *illness and economic pain. Please we all need to work together and help each other.*

520   *The basics of washing hands, wearing a face covering, keeping 2m from others,*

521   *getting a test if you have symptoms and self-isolating when told to do so, are simple*

522   *steps and need to be adhered to. Together we believe we can do this and make*

523   *progress to moving towards more pleasant times.*

524

525

526 In the first sentence, *we* and *us* are used with an exclusive referent, denoting the council;

527 this meaning is further strengthened by the contrast of referring to the constituents

528 (*residents* and *they*). The referent of *we* then becomes inclusive ("please we all need to

529 work together"), reinforced by adverbs and pronouns referring to collective action

530 (*together*, *each other*). Yet, the use of *please* in this sentence signals a request or advice,

531 which may indicate that the writer uses 1st person pronouns to mean the audience, not

532 themselves. Subsequently, there are two more shifts in levels of inclusivity revealed by a

533 closer look at the context of the pronouns: after adverb *together*, the sentence shifts to an

534 exclusive reference to the council (*we believe*) and then again to the shared action of the

535 public (*we can do this*). This may be indicative of an attempt to provide social justification

536 for the council's encouragement of behaviour among the public that is ultimately reliant

537 on individual responsibility.

538 Exclusive references of *we*, which account for 42% of instances of *we* in the

539 Facebook sub-corpus and 35% in the Twitter sub-corpus, occur in contexts where councils

540 explicitly refer to their own activities. Exclusive use of *we* also occurs when the council

541 expresses sympathy or understanding through a personification of the organisation (e.g.

542 *we know*, *we hope*, or *we believe*, *please share with us*; see Extract 2) thus projecting the

543 image of a trustworthy, benevolent group of people, as opposed to an abstract

544 organisation (Fuoli, 2018; Palmieri & Musi, 2020).

545 Reflecting on the predominance of inclusive as opposed to exclusive *we* in the data,

546 the discursive creation of common responsibility can be viewed as a strategy to address

547 "sociable rule-follower" audiences (Coleman et al., 2020, p. 14). The sense of inclusivity

548 and shared sense of experiences created through linguistic strategies can also serve to

549 address the public's crisis response, mitigating the emotional extremes, especially outrage

550 (Malecki, 2021). Although, at surface level, the exclusive use of the 1st person plural

551 pronoun may not be seen as a strategy to create engagement, the data suggests that,

552 through personification, it helps to discursively create features with the apparent intention

553 to increase trust and consequently encourage compliance.

554

555 4.2.3 First person singular pronouns and the hypothetical reader

556 Even though the 1st person singular pronouns *I* and *me* are much less prevalent than those

557 discussed above (see Table 3), our analysis reveals a communicative strategy that can be

558 labelled 'hypothetical reader'. Across both the Facebook and Twitter sub-corpora, 54% of

559 the instances of *I* are used in reference to a speaker who has been created by the

560 communication team itself, often in a mock Q&A format, as demonstrated by Extract 3.

561

562   Extract 3

563   *Q: My Favourite pastime is going to the gym. How am I supposed to stay fit and*

564   *healthy during national lockdown.* [sic]

565   *A: The gym might be closed but you can still take unlimited exercise outdoors with*

566   *your household* [...]

567   (Stockport Council, 27 November 2020, Twitter)

568

569 This communication strategy seems to respond to the informational needs of the audience

570 by creating an illusion of bottom-up communication and the co-creation of knowledge.

571 However, since the questions asked in the social media posts have been written by local

572 government organisations themselves, they do not necessarily represent the actual

573 informational needs of their audiences, but rather the 'design' of what these audiences

574   may (need to) be interested in; the questions, presented as part of dialogic interactions

575   between the public and LGOs, may be interpreted as originating from the pro-active

576   listening to people's concerns. This linguistic strategy is autonomy-fostering in two ways:

577   firstly, it creates competence and behavioural change through the internalization of

578   communication (Porat et al., 2020); and, secondly, it solicits the public to take personal

579   responsibility through the construction of the voice of the reader.

580

581   4.2.4 Questions and reader engagement

582   Questions are a highly effective device to achieve communication goals in pandemic-

583   related health communication; they engage readers through dialogue and may directly

584   influence judgement and behaviour (Moore et al., 2012). For written texts, questions are

585   typically rhetorical; they create a semblance of dialogic interaction, without the reader

586   being able to actually respond to the writer (Curry, 2021). On social media, this situation

587   is slightly different, because readers do have the opportunity to respond, although in our

588   dataset the type of questions and their linguistic context (for example that questions are

589   often followed by an answer) seem to suggest that they were not necessarily meant to

590   elicit actual responses. Whether written with a genuine request for information or

591   rhetorically, questions allow authors to share "some of the processes of meaning-making

592   with their readers [···], [thus positioning readers] as active participants in the discourse"

593   (Vásquez, 2014, p. 107). Previous research has shown that on social media – Twitter

594   particularly – questions (as opposed to statements) lead to a significant increase in

595   engagement with the readership, especially if the questions contain 1st and 2nd person

596   pronouns (Lai & Farbrot, 2014).

597   Syntactically, questions can be grammatically complete or elliptical, meaning that

598   they contain reduced clauses or phrases (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Across both sub-

599 corpora, 40% of questions that make use of the question mark are elliptical, typically

600 lacking the modal auxiliary or subject. This usage can be explained by the need for brevity

601 – this is evidenced by the difference between the frequency of elliptical questions on

602 Facebook (where there are no constraints on length) and Twitter (where there is a

603 character constraint) – 31% and 60%, respectively. Another (or perhaps parallel)

604 explanation is that digital discourse often mimics spoken language, which is typically more

605 fragmented than writing (Carter & McCarthy, 1995). Such spoken-ness in digital writing

606 has previously been found to create a sense of shared experiences and lead to greater

607 engagement (Darics, 2020).

608   As Vásquez (2014: 107) observes in the context of online consumer reviews,

609 questions can serve many functions, including requesting information, expressing

610 suggestions and bringing a topic into focus. The following extracts exemplify the functions

611 identified among the 72 questions in our data.

612

613   Extracts 4a-4e

614   Extract 4a

615   *"It's just a cough, I'll be fine!"* **Sound familiar?** *You might think it is 'just a cough'*

616   *but it could be #coronavirus.*

617   (Oldham Council, 27 November 2020, Twitter)

618

619   Extract 4b

620   ***Want to help your loved ones stay connected during the coronavirus crisis?***

621   *@goodthingsfdn provide free Learn My Way courses on a range of things* […]

622   (Stockport, 12 November 2020, Twitter)

623

624   Extract 4c

625   **Got Coronavirus symptoms?** 🤢 *OR* **Tested positive?** 🤧 *You must self-isolate*

626   *for 10 days.*

627   (Blackburn with Darwen Council, 24 November 2020, Twitter)

628

629   Extract 4d

630   **Do you know of any businesses that have breached Covid guidelines?**

631   *Report them here* 👉

632   (Blackburn with Darwen Council, 18 November 2020, Facebook)

633

634   Extract 4e

635   **How will you be remembering this year?** 🌹 *Due to the coronavirus restrictions in*

636   *place, things are a little different* [⋯]

637   (Blackburn with Darwen Council, 7 November 2020, Facebook)

638

639   Extracts 4a-c show questions that function to draw focus to a specific topic in order

640   to provide information. This is the most common question function, accounting for 83.3%

641   of examples. This strategy appears to be most useful when the information being

642   introduced does not apply to all potential readers but specific subsections. Questions of

643   this type function similarly to conditionals (Section 4.2.1) as focussing devices that appeal

644   to the reader to determine, based upon the criteria encoded in the question, whether they

645   are a member of the targeted subsection, and thus whether the information provided

646   subsequently applies to them. This strategy is used to facilitate reader engagement in the

647   communication of informational propositions, functioning variously to provide advice

648   (34.7%; e.g. 4a), offer support (25%; e.g. 4b) and issue orders (23.6%; e.g. 4c).

649   Extract 4d is, like 4a-c, a closed question, which acts as a filter of the relevance to

650   the reader of the information that follows. However, unlike 4a-c, the next line is an

651   instruction to provide the information requested by the question, meaning that this is an

652   example of a genuine request for information from the reader, rather than a provision of

653   information by the writer. Requests account for 13.9% of examples.

654   Extract 4e contains an open question that, like Extracts 4a-c, acts as a preamble

655   to a proposition, in this case information about Remembrance Day celebrations. However,

656   what is notable about 4e is the use of this question to encode a presupposition, defined

657   pragmatically as a proposition that is assumed by the writer to be accepted by the reader

658   (see e.g. Stalnaker, 1974). In this example, the presupposition is that readers should plan

659   to celebrate Remembrance Day in a way that complies with current COVID-related

660   restrictions. This is encoded firstly by *how*, which assumes that the reader will be

661   celebrating Remembrance Day, and secondly by *this year*, which assumes that the reader

662   already knows that they should celebrate differently than in previous years. Arguably, this

663   is an example of informative presupposition, whereby the writer deploys a presupposition

664   that may not be shared by the reader (Lewis, 1979), the function of which being to

665   persuade the reader to adopt the presupposed idea (Sbisà, 1999). Questions of this type

666   are coded as implicit suggestions, and account for 4.2% of examples.

667   Another noteworthy observation regarding questions is the voice that is

668   represented. In most cases (91% on Facebook; 96% on Twitter), the voice represented by

669   the question is that of the relevant council. However, the voice of the remainder of

670   questions is implied – as if the tweet gave voice to a hypothetical audience member (as

671   discussed in Section 4.2.3), in the form of a mock Q&A.

672   Questions are used as a productive resource for generating engagement. The

673   analysis shows that even though the majority (80.5%) are closed 'yes/no' questions, which

674 appear simply to elicit information from the reader, they actually fulfil a range of roles in

675 pandemic health communication that mostly serve to provide (as opposed to gather)

676 information. When not eliciting information, they serve as attention grabbing devices, a

677 role that has been proven to effectively engage readership (Lai & Farbrot, 2014). This is

678 particularly true for questions we identified as focusing on new topics (Extracts 4a-c) and

679 implicit suggestions (Extract 4e). Prompts and suggestions also serve an important role in

680 affecting judgement and behaviour explicitly by highlighting discrepancies between the

681 audience's knowledge and societal/government expectations (Moore et al., 2012), as

682 shown in Extract 4e. Such attention grabbing can help council messages to be more

683 personal and stand out in the social media information overload.

684

685 4.2.5 Hashtags and salient information reinforcement

686 Hashtags are metadiscourse resources typical of microblogging and other social media

687 platforms. Their original function was to create tags that identify topics of discussion, and

688 indeed researchers made use of these identifiers to explore emerging topics during the

689 pandemic (Petersen & Gerken, 2021). However, apart from their role as tags, hashtags

690 can take on a range of communication functions, from experiential functions such as

691 marking topics to interpersonal functions such as providing evaluative metacommentary

692 (Zappavigna, 2018). Structure-wise, hashtags can occur independently (at the beginning

693 or end of the social media post) or embedded in the syntactic structure.

694 Although the relatively low frequency of hashtags in the data (a result of the small

695 size of our dataset) forces us to be hesitant in our conclusions, independent hashtags

696 constitute 55% and 46% of all hashtags on Facebook and Twitter, respectively. While there

697 are several examples of independent hashtags functioning as topic markers, providing a

698 description of what the post is about (for example *#coronavirus*, *#COVID19* and *#Diwali*;

699   see Table 6), the most common function of independent hashtags, constituting 48% of all

700   independent hashtags, is to perform orders. Hashtags such as *#doyourbit*, *#StayatHome*,

701   *#StaySafe*, and *#StopTheSpread* have a clearly identifiable imperative structure, and

702   others, such as *#HandsFaceSpace*, are abbreviated references to orders. Together, in the

703   broader context of the government pandemic crisis communication efforts, these

704   examples can be understood as standpoints – points of view that are defended or justified

705   by means of argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004). Specifically, these are

706   prescriptive standpoints – they ask the reader not only "to accept the [writer's] evaluation

707   of a particular situation, but also that a certain course of action needs […] to be

708   undertaken in order to change that situation" (Wackers et al., 2021: 71). In other words,

709   they say that the current situation requires action to be taken, but not why, because the

710   reader is expected to infer the rationale from the co-text in the post and/or through

711   presupposition of readers' awareness of the pandemic.

712   The imperative function is amplified when posts feature several hashtags, such as

713   Figure 1, where *#StaySafe* and *#DoYourBit* have a clear imperative function, the latter

714   repeated in the attached image and with a marked colour distinction, and the third hashtag

715   taking on a function of topic marker.

Figure 1. Screenshot of tweet from Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council, posted 8 November 2020.

In a small number of cases (11% of all independent hashtags), we have identified hashtags that provide what Wikström (2014) calls parenthetical or additional information, such as *#greatertogether* and *#BetterTogether*. In contrast to the imperative hashtags, these can be interpreted not as expressing a standpoint but as expressing arguments in favour of a standpoint. *#BetterTogether*, for example, is used by Oldham Council in an announcement of local funding from the Greater Manchester Combined Authority for businesses impacted by COVID-19 (Extract 5). Unlike the imperative hashtags, which have an implied subject (the reader), the subject of the parenthetical hashtags is ambiguous; whom or what is 'better together' is ambiguous, even when taking into account the content of the post. Therefore, the hashtag may support one or more of several possible evaluative standpoints – expressions of judgement about facts (Wackers et al., 2021: 70). In Extract 5, *#BetterTogether* may refer specifically to the authorities having intervened to support

732 the survival of local businesses. It may (alternatively, or in addition) appeal to the broader

733 sense of collective action required by all citizens in order to get through the pandemic (see

734 Section 4.2.2 on inclusivity).

735

736   Extract 5

737   @greatermcr pledge £10m to support businesses unable to access

738   #BounceBackLoans.

739   Delivered by @GC_BizFinance, there's no need to be an existing customer or open

740   an account.

741   For the businesses that make Greater Manchester GREAT!

742   https://bit.ly/2WQqYPg

743   **#BetterTogether**

744   (Oldham Council, 16 November 2020, Twitter)

745

746 In such examples, the additional information seems to take on a motivational, emotionally

747 expressive force, resulting in the compassionate communication that Finset et al. (2020)

748 and Malecki et al. (2020) define as crucial for the effective management of the pandemic.

749

Table 6. Top 15 most commonly-used hashtags in the Facebook and Twitter sub-corpora.

Rank	Facebook sub-corpus			Twitter sub-corpus		
	Hashtag	Frequency	Relative frequency (per 10,000)	Hashtag	Frequency	Relative frequency (per 10,000)
1	#coronavirus, #Coronavirus	32	17.16	#coronavirus, #Coronavirus	49	33.97
2	#DoYourBit, #doyourbit	27	14.48	#DoYourBit, #doyourbit	23	15.95
3	#HandsFaceSpace	12	6.43	#Oldham	17	11.79
4	#COVID19	11	5.90	#HandsFaceSpace	12	8.32
5	#StaySafe	9	4.83	#CouncilsCan	11	7.63
6	#StayAtHome, #StayatHome	7	3.75	#WeAreOldham	11	7.63

7	#Diwali	5	2.68	#COVID19	10	6.93
8	#OneStockport, #onestockport	5	2.68	#StaySafe	10	6.93
9	#TestAndTrace	5	2.68	#MentalHealth	8	5.55
10	#ShopLocal, #shoplocal	4	2.14	#RemembranceSunday	8	5.55
11	#BandiChhorDivas	3	1.61	#Diwali	6	4.16
12	#greatertogether, #GreaterTogether	3	1.61	#England	6	4.16
13	#hereforbusiness	3	1.61	#BetterTogether	4	2.77
14	#RediscoverSafely	3	1.61	#BounceBack	4	2.77
15	#TransformingTravel	3	1.61	#StayAtHome, #StayatHome	4	2.77

751

752   Embedded hashtags make up 45% and 54% of hashtags on Facebook and Twitter

753 respectively. In the majority of cases (84% overall), embedded hashtags function as topic

754 markers, where the # symbol acts as a form of punctuation to signal the tag (Zappavigna,

755 2018). In other cases, embedded hashtags can take on the communicative function of the

756 clause in which they feature; most typically, this means the incorporation of the imperative

757 tags into the sentence structure (for example: "They mean you must #Stayathome as

758 much as possible"). Here too, the hashtag symbol adds an additional markedness to the

759 directive, while simultaneously referencing the broader discourse of the stay-at-home

760 message of the government.

761

762 5. Response of the participating local government organisations

763 Following our analysis, we presented our findings to communications professionals from

764 the five local government organisations that participated in our study and held an online

765 focus group to gather their feedback.

766   The fact that our data collection focussed on the second national lockdown was a

767 strategic decision in the hope that, by November 2020 (some nine months into the national

768 pandemic response in the UK), councils would have had time to develop guidelines for

769 COVID-related communication. In reality, only one of our partner organisations had

770 developed such a document. Because of the sudden onset and unprecedented

771 development of the situation, and the extremely high stakes regarding public health, local

772 council organisations were eager to gain some insight about the effectiveness of their, and

773 others', practices.

774   In response to our findings, the communications professionals were receptive to

775 the opportunity to reflect on their practice and pause to consider how they responded to

776 the challenges of the pandemic response. Especially valuable was the opportunity to

compare their communications to those of other councils from elsewhere in England who were dealing with the same challenge but in varying geographical and socio-political circumstances. One participant saw value in being shown "the way we can use language and in particular 'you' and 'we' to engage with the audience", while another appreciated "understanding more about what we do and the science behind it". A third was excited to "share with the team around use of language, empathy and other key points to help improve what we do".

Another takeaway from our participants was the sense that, as communications professionals, they had felt largely overlooked and undervalued during the pandemic response, often receiving decisions about national restrictions at the same time as the general public with no advance warning. This, as they reported to us, created a situation where much of the local communication was hurriedly scrambled to keep up with the national messaging. One participant noted that, as a result, much of their COVID-related communication was produced "intuitively…at speed"; therefore, being shown by researchers how linguistic patterns in the data can be ascribed to specific communicative functions made them realise that their work "actually is hugely skilful and valuable". Related to this is the fact that, while these people were working for local councils to help the public respond appropriately to the pandemic, they were also affected by COVID-19 as personally and emotionally as everyone else and they were adjusting to the ever-changing national restrictions at the same time as the people they were supporting. One participant noted "it's a reminder really that comms doesn't [just] affect our audiences; it affects us too. So staying in the mindset of this for future campaigns is really important."

Overall, the response to our initial study was encouraging. All participants shared an enthusiasm and appreciation for the analysis we conducted and expressed interest in contributing data towards a larger study. We are currently working with these and other

802 local government organisations to gather more data from other key time periods (e.g. the

803 first and third national UK lockdowns, and the 2021-22 wave of the Omicron variant) to

804 explore how communications strategies developed across the first two years of the

805 pandemic in the UK. We have also begun to expand upon our analysis by considering the

806 important role of visual modes of communication in LGO social media posts (Darics &

807 Love, 2023). We have noted, for instance, the presence of a large number of emoji

808 embedded within the texts of the posts, as well as the use of a variety of images that

809 accompany many of the posts. In future, multimodal corpus analysis (e.g. Oakey et al.,

810 2022) will be necessary to properly take these communicative tools into account alongside

811 the textual mode. Ultimately, our aim is to reveal to the communications professionals the

812 underlying logic behind their communicative strategies and make our findings available to

813 representatives from LGOs across the UK.

814

815 6. Conclusion

816 This paper began by outlining the complex nature of public health communication during

817 the pandemic, especially from the point of view of strategic communication, the main aim

818 of which is to achieve public compliance. It has been shown that communicators had a

819 particularly hard task in navigating the 'infodemic' and attending to different types of

820 audiences (Coleman et al, 2020) and communication aims, and this paper set out to

821 provide an initial snapshot into how a small sample of local councils in England were able

822 to navigate these challenges. The analysis was based on the premise that audiences are

823 more likely to comply with the health messaging if they are 'involved' with the message

824 (Parrot, 1995). To this end, the study examined how micro-level linguistic features were

825 used to encourage engagement while helping to address the various publics and fostering

826 relatedness, fostering autonomy and cutting through the 'infodemic'.

827   One feature that occurred repeatedly in the analysis above is the ambiguity of

828 linguistic resources. This is somewhat counter to the advice previously given in public

829 health communication about avoiding ambiguity (Parrott, 1995), though it has been

830 observed by scholars in pandemic-related communication elsewhere (Gelmini et al.,

831 2021). As we have shown in Section 1, the complexity of pandemic crisis communication

832 is in part the result of the presence of a wide range of audiences, all of whom should be

833 addressed and engaged. The ambiguous and widening referent base of *we* and *us*, for

834 example, allows for differing interpretations by the audiences, depending on whether they

835 prefer to be affiliated with the authors of the posts or not.

836 Ambiguity was also observed in some types of hashtags. Among the independent

837 hashtags, directive hashtags (e.g. *#StaySafe*) appear to serve as explicit commands (cf.

838 Pérez-Hernández, 2018), representing prescriptive argumentative standpoints (Eemeren

839 & Grootendorst, 2004; Wackers et al., 2021). However, albeit less frequently, parenthetical

840 hashtags (Wikström, 2014) such as *#bettertogether* demonstrate the interpersonal,

841 evaluative functions of hashtags (Zappavigna, 2018). They put forward arguments in

842 support of ambiguous standpoints, thus relying on readers to supply their individual

843 interpretations. However, hashtags used to perform the most common function in our data,

844 topic marking (e.g. *#coronavirus*), are unambiguous; they explicitly reinforce connotations

845 related to the overall message, making key information salient, which reflects the LGOs'

846 efforts to cut through the 'infodemic', while appealing to a range of audiences.

847   There is also evidence of how the councils used autonomy-supporting

848 communication strategies, which, according to Porat et al. (2020), lead to autonomous

849 motivation, and are more likely to lead to sustainable change. One such strategy is the use

850 of questions which, although not often inviting actual responses, nonetheless involve

851 readers in the meaning-making process by giving them the sense of interactive, reader-

852   involved engagement (cf. Curry, 2021). The analysis of 2nd person pronoun *you* has also

853   shown similar efforts, whereby deontic posts were predominantly articulated in the form

854   of encouragement, thus shifting the responsibility to the readers. Both in conditional

855   sentences (Section 4.2.1) and in questions encouraging desired behaviours through

856   presupposition (Section 4.2.4), readers were encouraged to individually interpret their

857   experience and verify for themselves whether it matched the scenario hypothesized in the

858   post and take responsibility for the consequent behaviour. The use of 1st person pronouns

859   in what was identified as mock Q&A provided a voice for the reader (albeit a hypothetical

860   one), creating a sense of personal responsibility and encouraging the internalization of the

861   messages.

862   Finally, the analysis shows the councils' efforts to balance an image consistent

863   with the ethos of a public authority with strategies that make information and guidance

864   stand out in the 'infodemic'. Messages used a range of attention-grabbing devices

865   (questions and mock Q&A), visual markedness (hashtags) and discourse strategies to

866   appeal to a shared sense of physical experiences (spoken features). Through use of direct

867   address (*you*) and inclusivity (*we*), a prevalent number of social media posts used

868   synthetic personalisation to encourage readers to interpret the guidance as having direct

869   relevance to them – this process has previously been found to successfully facilitate active

870   engagement and compliance with public health messaging (Parrott, 1995).

871   Perhaps the most important realisation is that the examined metadiscourse

872   devices – first and second person pronouns, questions, and hashtags – take on a range of

873   concurrent interactive functions that make official social media crisis communication

874   trustworthy, interesting, relevant and relatable: the four exact message quality features

875   Atkin (2012) calls for in persuasive health communication. Although the analysis in this

876   paper has only been able to provide a snapshot of select linguistic features, it nonetheless

877   provides scholars and practitioners with an insight into the importance of exploring micro-

878   level language phenomena in strategic communication. We hope that the linguistic and

879   discourse strategies shown in this paper may serve as concrete examples that provide a

880   basis for reflection for communication practitioners so that they can craft messages with

881   a greater chance of success in mobilising the public.

882   Finally, the response of both our communications consultant and representatives

883   from the councils who participated in this study reinforce the crucial role that local

884   organisations had in mediating and 'translating' messaging from government

885   communications. The communication teams of these local government organisations

886   found themselves under immense pressure. While personally battling through the

887   unprecedented times of a global pandemic, they had to respond professionally in an

888   unfamiliar communication context, working with oftentimes problematic, ambiguous

889   government messaging (e.g. Williams & Wright, 2022). As we learned from our

890   participants, their work very much relied on instinctive responses to national regulations.

891   As our work with these and other local government organisations continues, we aim to

892   develop communicative guidelines to help these previously under-appreciated

893   communications professionals feel better supported in advising their local public in times

894   of crisis.

895

901

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