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Engaging the public: English local government organisations' social media communications during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Communication has played a critical role during the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and communicators have had a particularly difficult task in persuading different types of audience to comply with ever-changing regulations. Local government organisations play a crucial role in recontextualising the national messaging for a local audience and encouraging the public to comply with regulations.

This paper investigates local government organisations' (henceforth LGOs) engagement strategies in COVID-related posts on social media. In collaboration with LGOs in England, we examined their communication strategies on Twitter and Facebook during the second UK national lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in November-December 2020. Using methods from corpus-assisted discourse studies, the paper analyses the occurrence and functions of selected interactive engagement markers, in this case personal pronouns, questions and hashtags. We find that such linguistic features function to encourage engagement by (a) helping to foster relatedness through ambiguity; (b) 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,

[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%).

2013; Parrott, 1995). It is because of this diversity that gaining the audience's engagement is often as (if not more) important as presenting them with compelling reasons to support the advocated standpoint. Achieving an appropriate level of appreciation for the relevance of an issue is a prerequisite for encouraging an audience's critical engagement with the information and arguments that are communicated (Jacobs, 2006).

In order to understand how public messaging achieves this aim, it is important to conduct a close examination of previous public science messages, as public campaigners make substantial use of a range of interpersonal strategies to encourage audience engagement, including metadiscourse markers such as pronouns, non-verbal devices (e.g. images) and, in the context of social media, features such as hashtags and emoji (Martin & MacDonald, 2020). However, the close, micro-level analysis of messages on social media remains an under-investigated area within strategic communication research (Aggerholm & Thomsen, 2014; Werder, 2015; Palmieri & Mazzali-Lurati, 2021). This paper sets out to examine the language of COVID-related social media posts by local authorities in England, focusing on markers of engagement. The aim of this paper is to report on an initial investigation of how micro-level discourse patterns can work as linguistic indicators of communication strategies intended to minimise negative outcomes for local public health. Therefore, the results constitute the basis for further research aimed at examining these strategies on a larger and broader scale and, ultimately, understanding better the role of localised social media in national crisis management.

The specific context chosen for this study is that of local government organisations (henceforth LGOs) in England. These are the county, district, borough and city councils "responsible for a range of vital services for people and businesses in defined areas" (LGA, 2022). LGOs constitute an ideal terrain for investigating engagement strategies with complex audiences; indeed, socio-demographic factors, cultural and personality traits,

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

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

[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/

from scientific resources such as the National Health Service (NHS), the World Health Organisation (WHO) or healthcare professionals (over 88%), or local organisations (72%) than from the national government (63%). In terms of the content of messages, 70% of respondents thought that there was a conflict between government and scientific advice, and 73% thought that government messages were too vague. A closer look at the different types of public audiences gives a more refined picture. For example, 90% of people classed as 'information-seeking critics' (characterised by an 'entrenched suspicion of official advice') found messages too open to interpretation, compared to only 50% of those labelled as 'information-seeking rule followers'.[4] Apart from drawing attention to the general lack of trust in government advice, this report further highlights the importance of communication strategies that engage with specific audiences (see also Section 2.2).

Academic studies provide an overview of the complex relationship between trust, audience and communication in a range of geo-political contexts, such as Singapore (Wong & Jensen, 2020), the UK (Enria et al., 2020; Williams & Wright, 2022), Italy (Lovari, 2020), Sweden (Irwin, 2020), China (Zhang et al., 2020), Australia and New Zealand (Bui et al., 2021) and the Netherlands (van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). Lovari's (2020) study of the Italian Health Ministry's communication focuses on social media; it is especially relevant to the present study because of the parallels in terms of the deep distrust in public institutions, combined with the public's growing demand for information both in Italy and the UK. Lovari (2020) examined how the Italian Health Ministry turned to social media, specifically Facebook, to counter the spread of misinformation. The strategies identified include giving voice to influencers, using hashtags, calling out fake news and explaining measures through data and visuals. Lovari concluded that, in a period of extreme

[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:

189 - tailoring messages to the specific audience and fostering relatedness between
190 the public and the source of the message (feeling cared for by others, trusted
191 and understood) (Malecki et al., 2020; Porat et al., 2020; Power & Crosthwaite,
192 2022; Ratzan et al., 2020; Stolow et al., 2020);
193 - empathic, compassionate communication (Finset et al., 2020; Malecki et al.,
194 2020; Bui, Moses & Dumay, 2021);
195 - acknowledging uncertainty (Finset et al., 2020; Porat et al., 2020; Ratzan et al.,
196 2020; Wong & Jensen, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020);
197 - fostering autonomy (Habersaat et al., 2020; Porat et al., 2020; McGlaughlin et
198 al., 2023; Williams & Wright, 2022);
199 - cutting through the 'infodemic' (Finset et al., 2020; Ratzan et al., 2020).

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

204 a) source-related strategies, which aim to emphasise the legitimacy of the
205 information by communicating trustworthiness and confidence in the science
206 behind the advice;
207 b) audience-related strategies, which aim to encourage autonomy, relatedness and
208 empathy.

209 For example, McGlaughlin et al. (2023) conducted a survey of the UK public's response to
210 various COVID-related public health messages, finding that messaging perceived to be
211 effective provides "a clear rationale for adhering to measures and a means for the public
212 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.

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

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

280 Although these features do not represent the full range of known metadiscourse
281 strategies, our study aims to focus on these features as a window through which to
282 observe some of the patterns of use and communicative functions of engagement
283 strategies in pandemic-related communications by local government organisations.
284

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

[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]

[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

340 3.2 Analytical Approach

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

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

357 Then, the relative frequency of these terms was normalised to a basis of 10,000.
358 Rather than using a basis of one million, which is common in corpus linguistics, a basis of
359 10,000 avoids artificially inflating the frequency of features relative to the size of the
360 corpus in this study (Brezina, 2018: 43). Relative frequency was used to inform the
361 selection of individual terms for further, qualitative exploration, with a preference for the
362 most commonly occurring terms. This step involved the extraction of all concordance lines
363 of a given term as occurring in both sub-corpora, and the manual examination and
364 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

[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.

action (for further argument see Grieve, 2021). Following the discussion of our initial findings in Section 4, and the response of the participating organisations in Section 5, we discuss – in Section 6 – how this study will inform the next phase of our work.

4 Findings and Discussion

This section presents the analysis of the engagement markers under investigation, starting with overall frequency data (Section 4.1) and then describing the qualitative analysis of some of the most frequently occurring terms for each engagement marker type: personal pronouns and possessive determiners (Sections 4.2.1-4.2.3), questions (Section 4.2.4) and hashtags (Section 4.2.5).

4.1 Frequency Data

Table 3 shows the frequency of each of the search terms in the Facebook and Twitter sub-corpora. For each engagement marker type, the broad distribution of frequency is similar for both Facebook and Twitter sub-corpora, with the exception of the hashtag, which is notably more frequent for the Twitter data; this is expected, as the modern usage of the hashtag as a linguistic meta-tag originated on – and is most closely associated with – Twitter, but has spread to other social media sites including Facebook (Zappavigna, 2018). 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.

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

The prevailing use of declaratives may compromise audience engagement compared to using other types of clauses, such as imperatives and exclamatives. Yet, the use of conditionals and interrogatives, which together represent 29% of instances of *you* across both sub-corpora, indicates that an attempt to engage the readers is present. Indeed, conditional clauses are useful for selecting specific audience groups, attracting their attention and creating a sense of involvement. For example, in Extract 1 shows, readers are invited to verify whether they belong to the category at issue and, if so, to follow the advocated order (compare with observations in Section 4.2.4).

Extract 1

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

home to go for a test and do not stop self-isolating until you have been given the all clear. This is to stop the spread of #coronavirus

(Oldham Council, 28 November 2020, Twitter)

Furthermore, this demonstrates a strategy of synthetic personalisation that is compatible with the mass-mediated nature of the social media post; the use of *you* simulates a personalised messaging style that encourages engagement by giving an "impression of treating each of the people 'handled' *en masse* as an individual" (Fairclough, 2001: 52)..

As for interrogatives, the questions asked by the writers appear to be intended to (a) stir the curiosity or attention of the audience, inviting them to engage with the content of the post, and (b) personalise the message to the expectation of specific individual readers. Interestingly, the most frequent communicative aim of the posts containing interrogatives is to encourage action (discussed further in Section 4.2.4).

Clauses containing *you* put the active role of the readers in the foreground, assigning them responsibility. Among the declaratives, actions in which *you* is the subject dominate. A frequent pattern (50.36% of all 421 *you*-subject declaratives in the corpus) is the use of modal auxiliaries with deontic function (e.g. *you should*, *you must*), almost exclusively when referring to actions mandated by COVID-related rules. Of these, the majority (79.25%) order or permit affirmative action (e.g. "Despite national restrictions, you can still exercise outdoors"), while examples of explicit prohibition via negation (e.g. "You must not meet socially indoors with family or friends") are relatively rare (20.75%). This can be interpreted as an autonomy-facilitating strategy whereby LGOs attempt to remind readers of the freedoms that remain, despite the restrictions in place. There is a low frequency of advising compared to encouragements, where the former entails responsibility on the writer while the latter shifts responsibility on the reader.

Taken as a whole, the posts containing *you* appear to be structured in such a way to make the readers responsible and interested (cf. Chang 2011) in the post while allowing the writers to maintain an image consistent with the ethos of a public authority.

4.2.2 First person plural pronouns and inclusivity

In both the Facebook and Twitter sub-corpora, *we* is the second most frequently used personal pronoun, behind *you*. In political discourse, *we* has been identified as one of the most widely used discursive resources to perform inclusion (e.g. Jaworska & Sogomonian, 2019). This is unsurprising – *we* is a notoriously ambiguous pronoun; it has meanings that can be categorised broadly as *exclusive* or *inclusive*. Exclusive usage refers only to the writer (and the people they represent, e.g. "We'd love to hear your stories"). Inclusive usage is, in our analysis, categorised into three types: *general* (referring to all people, e.g. "We must follow the latest national restrictions"), *local* (referring to the writer and the reader(s) only, e.g. "These shops will only survive if we continue to spend locally") (see Darics & Koller, 2019), and *pseudo 2nd person*. Pseudo 2nd person usage occurs when *we* refers to the reader(s) only and not the writer – this usage does not refer to the writer but instead implies a command (cf. Lammers, 2001 quoted in Van de Mieroop, 2009). We coded instances as pseudo 2nd person when it was clear from elsewhere in the tweet that the command is actually addressed to the audience (e.g. "We all have a responsibility to stop the spread of Coronavirus. Remember to: Wash your hands regularly"). The exclusive/inclusive distinction can also be applied to *us* and *our*. The ambiguity of the pronominal referent may be used as a strategy to share responsibility for managing the pandemic with the public (cf. Williams & Wright, 2022) and mitigate the directness of the 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.*

(Blackburn with Darwen Council, 5 November 2020, Facebook)

In the first sentence, *we* and *us* are used with an exclusive referent, denoting the council; this meaning is further strengthened by the contrast of referring to the constituents (*residents* and *they*). The referent of *we* then becomes inclusive ("please we all need to work together"), reinforced by adverbs and pronouns referring to collective action (*together*, *each other*). Yet, the use of *please* in this sentence signals a request or advice, which may indicate that the writer uses 1st person pronouns to mean the audience, not themselves. Subsequently, there are two more shifts in levels of inclusivity revealed by a closer look at the context of the pronouns: after adverb *together*, the sentence shifts to an exclusive reference to the council (*we believe*) and then again to the shared action of the public (*we can do this*). This may be indicative of an attempt to provide social justification for the council's encouragement of behaviour among the public that is ultimately reliant on individual responsibility.

Exclusive references of *we*, which account for 42% of instances of *we* in the Facebook sub-corpus and 35% in the Twitter sub-corpus, occur in contexts where councils explicitly refer to their own activities. Exclusive use of *we* also occurs when the council expresses sympathy or understanding through a personification of the organisation (e.g. *we know*, *we hope*, or *we believe*, *please share with us*; see Extract 2) thus projecting the image of a trustworthy, benevolent group of people, as opposed to an abstract organisation (Fuoli, 2018; Palmieri & Musi, 2020).

Reflecting on the predominance of inclusive as opposed to exclusive *we* in the data, the discursive creation of common responsibility can be viewed as a strategy to address "sociable rule-follower" audiences (Coleman et al., 2020, p. 14). The sense of inclusivity 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

may (need to) be interested in; the questions, presented as part of dialogic interactions between the public and LGOs, may be interpreted as originating from the pro-active listening to people's concerns. This linguistic strategy is autonomy-fostering in two ways: firstly, it creates competence and behavioural change through the internalization of communication (Porat et al., 2020); and, secondly, it solicits the public to take personal responsibility through the construction of the voice of the reader.

4.2.4 Questions and reader engagement

Questions are a highly effective device to achieve communication goals in pandemic-related health communication; they engage readers through dialogue and may directly influence judgement and behaviour (Moore et al., 2012). For written texts, questions are typically rhetorical; they create a semblance of dialogic interaction, without the reader being able to actually respond to the writer (Curry, 2021). On social media, this situation is slightly different, because readers do have the opportunity to respond, although in our dataset the type of questions and their linguistic context (for example that questions are often followed by an answer) seem to suggest that they were not necessarily meant to elicit actual responses. Whether written with a genuine request for information or rhetorically, questions allow authors to share "some of the processes of meaning-making with their readers […], [thus positioning readers] as active participants in the discourse" (Vásquez, 2014, p. 107). Previous research has shown that on social media – Twitter particularly – questions (as opposed to statements) lead to a significant increase in engagement with the readership, especially if the questions contain 1st and 2nd person pronouns (Lai & Farbrot, 2014).

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

Extract 4c

Got Coronavirus symptoms? *OR* ***Tested positive?*** *You must self-isolate for 10 days.*

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

Extract 4d

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

Report them here

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

Extract 4e

How will you be remembering this year? *Due to the coronavirus restrictions in place, things are a little different* [...]

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

Extracts 4a-c show questions that function to draw focus to a specific topic in order to provide information. This is the most common question function, accounting for 83.3% of examples. This strategy appears to be most useful when the information being introduced does not apply to all potential readers but specific subsections. Questions of this type function similarly to conditionals (Section 4.2.1) as focussing devices that appeal to the reader to determine, based upon the criteria encoded in the question, whether they are a member of the targeted subsection, and thus whether the information provided subsequently applies to them. This strategy is used to facilitate reader engagement in the communication of informational propositions, functioning variously to provide advice (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.

716

717 Figure 1. Screenshot of tweet from Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council,

718 posted 8 November 2020.

719

720 In a small number of cases (11% of all independent hashtags), we have identified

721 hashtags that provide what Wikström (2014) calls parenthetical or additional information,

722 such as *#greatertogether* and *#BetterTogether*. In contrast to the imperative hashtags,

723 these can be interpreted not as expressing a standpoint but as expressing arguments in

724 favour of a standpoint. *#BetterTogether*, for example, is used by Oldham Council in an

725 announcement of local funding from the Greater Manchester Combined Authority for

726 businesses impacted by COVID-19 (Extract 5). Unlike the imperative hashtags, which have

727 an implied subject (the reader), the subject of the parenthetical hashtags is ambiguous;

728 whom or what is 'better together' is ambiguous, even when taking into account the content

729 of the post. Therefore, the hashtag may support one or more of several possible evaluative

730 standpoints – expressions of judgement about facts (Wackers et al., 2021: 70). In Extract

731 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

750 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-

involved engagement (cf. Curry, 2021). The analysis of 2nd person pronoun *you* has also shown similar efforts, whereby deontic posts were predominantly articulated in the form of encouragement, thus shifting the responsibility to the readers. Both in conditional sentences (Section 4.2.1) and in questions encouraging desired behaviours through presupposition (Section 4.2.4), readers were encouraged to individually interpret their experience and verify for themselves whether it matched the scenario hypothesized in the post and take responsibility for the consequent behaviour. The use of 1st person pronouns in what was identified as mock Q&A provided a voice for the reader (albeit a hypothetical one), creating a sense of personal responsibility and encouraging the internalization of the messages.

Finally, the analysis shows the councils' efforts to balance an image consistent with the ethos of a public authority with strategies that make information and guidance stand out in the 'infodemic'. Messages used a range of attention-grabbing devices (questions and mock Q&A), visual markedness (hashtags) and discourse strategies to appeal to a shared sense of physical experiences (spoken features). Through use of direct address (*you*) and inclusivity (*we*), a prevalent number of social media posts used synthetic personalisation to encourage readers to interpret the guidance as having direct relevance to them – this process has previously been found to successfully facilitate active engagement and compliance with public health messaging (Parrott, 1995).

Perhaps the most important realisation is that the examined metadiscourse devices – first and second person pronouns, questions, and hashtags – take on a range of concurrent interactive functions that make official social media crisis communication trustworthy, interesting, relevant and relatable: the four exact message quality features Atkin (2012) calls for in persuasive health communication. Although the analysis in this 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

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901

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