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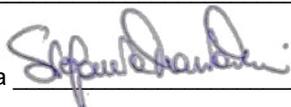
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2

The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Challenges on Social Issues

COVID-19: crisi e sfide nella società

Edited by

*Paola Catenaccio, Stefania M. Maci,
Denise Milizia, and Laura R. Olson*

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Editorial

How Linguistic Analysis Helps Us Understand the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have ushered in a new era of uncertainty around the globe. Misinformation occupies every corner of the internet, and increasingly humans have come to distrust one other and expert sources of information. It is safe to say that the pandemic was a major collective trauma, and that we are only now beginning to understand its deep ramifications for individuals and societies alike. This special issue of *Lingue Culture Mediazioni – LCM* presents a series of articles that explore a variety of these ramifications and their pandemic-era antecedents using diverse data, research methodologies, and underlying theoretical frameworks.

In its recent report titled *The COVID Decade*, the British Academy (2021) emphasizes the long-term impact of the pandemic on three areas of human life: health and wellbeing; communities, culture, and belonging; and knowledge, employment, and skills. The articles in this issue of *LCM* speak to how the written and spoken word illustrate each of these matters. An emphasis on news (real and fake) during the pandemic – both communication of it and interaction with it – ties several of the articles together. This body of work speaks to the British Academy’s (2021) view that the pandemic has had profound effects on human knowledge. Other articles address the toll the pandemic took on “communities, culture, and belonging” by investigating the politics and folklore of the age of COVID-19. A third focus of our issue is on “health and wellbeing”, as authors ask questions about public health communication during the

pandemic and the additional burden it placed on women. Finally, in its reflection on the long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis, the World Economic Forum emphasizes that the pandemic catalyzed the digital transformation of how we interact, work, and even shop (Willige 2021). Social media figure prominently throughout this issue of *LCM* as we contend with the many ways our lives moved online after March 2020.

Studies show that the COVID-19 pandemic had significant effects on the nature and frequency of many people's news consumption (e.g., Broersma and Swart 2021; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021). Two articles in this issue add to our understanding of how news stories acted as frames for the collective trauma of the crisis. Olga Denti considers what a *crisis* is in the first place before analyzing which information news stories conveyed about the pandemic, how they conveyed it, and the overarching nature of the narrative these stories ultimately created for their audiences. Ilaria Iori's article is an in-depth look at how leading newspapers in the United States and Australia framed their reporting about the country where the novel coronavirus first broke out, China. To what extent did these papers present information about China in belligerent, culturally demeaning ways? Like three other articles in this issue of *LCM*, Iori's study raises questions about how individuals interacted with news apart from just consuming it. Iori shows how the metaphors she identifies in the corpora she analyzes strengthened ingroup/outgroup boundaries, which surely had deleterious effects on the attitudes Americans and Australians expressed about China. Meanwhile, Maria Cristina Gatti, Cecilia Lazzeretti, and Francesca Vitali present a study that speaks to how organizations made strategic decisions about sharing news. Gatti and colleagues note that the discourse frameworks chosen by tourism communicators in South Tyrol were intended to preserve community in that province, thus shaping the results of how people interact with news. Michela Giordano and Maria Antonietta Marongiu take an entirely different approach to studying interaction with news by emphasizing memes as an aspect of *netlore* (Sánchez 2019), which is a web-based manifestation of folklore based in humor. Giordano and Marongiu note that memes about the pandemic spread nearly as fast as the coronavirus itself did, indicating that people found ways of coping with devastating news through (often dark) humor. Finally, Francesco Nacchia asks how people react when a story news reporting a scientific article dealing with red wine and protection against COVID-19 infection. His analysis of the comments section for this story on the online version of the *Daily Mail* reveals a great deal of sarcasm and distrust among readers.

Fake news comprises a third theme concerning news writ large in this issue of *LCM*. Three other articles devote substantial attention to misinformation and conspiracy theories. Marina Bondi and Jessica Jane Nocella essentially ask whether communication about the COVID-19 vaccine booster might have contravened public skepticism about it after fake news had decreased uptake of the vaccine worldwide. Gaetano Falco's article is a deep linguistic analysis of the discursive construction of fake news on social media during the early months of the pandemic. Laura Olson examines whether and how internet usage might increase perceptions of fake news about COVID-19 and various aspects of U.S. politics.

As mentioned above, social media are at least a tangential focus of many of the articles presented here: Antonella Napolitano presents a critical discourse analysis of replies to a Facebook post by the World Health Organization concerning the "pandemic within a pandemic" of domestic violence. Most directly of all, Andrea Cifalino, Ester Di Silvestro, and Marco Venuti offer a critical discourse analysis of politicians' use of Twitter to speak directly to their constituencies during and about the pandemic.

In addition to its impact on human knowledge, the COVID-19 pandemic had seismic effects on human communities and cultures (British Academy 2021). The articles in this issue of *LCM* shed linguistic light on several ways in which our communities and cultures have been transformed. Public policy is a core concern of Marion Ellison's article; she emphasizes gender-based power differentials in the United Kingdom and the language of public policies designed to address them.

Beyond politics, the pandemic exerted a powerful influence on popular culture and how people used their time. In addition, Carlotta Susca shows in brilliant detail how our virtual lives on Zoom were reflected in special episodes of television programs.

Quite naturally, the British Academy (2021) also emphasizes the profound impact the pandemic had on health and wellness. Maglie and Groicher investigate how podcasts about the coronavirus by high-profile physicians in the U.S. and Australia might have facilitated sense-making and sense-giving about the pandemic among their listeners.

In short, this issue of *Lingue Culture Mediazioni* presents a substantively wide range of articles, but all connect back to the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed our world. The articles are methodologically diverse as well, with many of the authors engaging in corpus analysis but others taking various other qualitative and quantitative approaches. Theoretically, the work of Ruth Wodak provides a

powerful thread connecting all these works. Wodak's (2021) observations about the significance of discursive frames for coping with the pandemic are especially penetrating and relevant, but her broader critical discursive perspective (Wodak 2011) informs much of the scholarship presented here as well. We are pleased to have had the opportunity to bring together such an impactful group of scholars for this shared effort.

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COVID-19 Crisis Management in Newspaper Articles

A Diachronic Analysis

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7358/lcm-2023-002-deno>

ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on how the COVID-19 crisis was dealt with and represented in newspaper articles in the period January 2020-February 2022. To this end, a corpus of articles was compiled from the *Times* using Sketch Engine (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/>), in order to manage and investigate the corpus quantitatively; discourse and genre analyses were applied for the qualitative approach. After providing a definition of the coronavirus timespan and the term *crisis*, the paper explores how the language used changed over successive periods of crisis management and communication (Coombs 2010). It also shows how the unpredictable development of the pandemic had an effect on communication flows, which in turn affected how the crisis unfolded. Different types of information were conveyed through the media that played a crucial role in selecting what to convey (and what not to convey) to the readers and how to represent it. This significantly contributed (and continues to contribute) to the development of the readers' opinions and sentiments, fuelling their worries and feelings of uncertainty, weakness and risk (Denti 2021; Wodak 2021). Future research will focus on metadiscursive features and the changes in rhetorical persuasion (Hyland 2005), and on the politicisation of the crisis (Musolff *et al.* 2022; Thielemann and Weiss 2023).

Keywords: communication phases; COVID-19; crisis management; DA; language development; news discourse; perceptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus (WHO, <https://www.who.int/>). First reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, it spread rapidly around the world becoming the most critical global health emergency so far this century. Affecting everybody's lives, it has created tremendous challenges to be faced by people, private and public institutions, and governments at all levels.

Figure 1 shows the development of COVID-19 in the period considered (January 2020 - February 2022). The main waves of COVID-19 infections were driven by the virus variants which partially invalidated the positive outcomes of vaccination programmes, social restrictions, testing and quarantines. The period March-June 2020 marked the first wave, which severely hit almost the entire globe in different moments; the southern hemisphere was affected slightly later. The second wave, in the period July-September 2020, was characterised by increasing death rates and mandatory precautionary measures. The third wave, in the period October 2020 - February 2021, saw the release of the first vaccines. The fourth wave, in the period August-November 2021, was characterised by the Delta variant surge, while the fifth wave, in the period December 2021 - February 2022, by the rise of the Omicron variant. The period after Christmas 2021 also marked the beginning of a slow improvement. Even though people's attitude toward the crisis had been contrasting and varied, the increase in vaccination campaigns, the reduction of death rates and coordinated governmental planning contributed to reducing the sense of danger and uncertainty that characterised the first waves (Dutta 2022; El-Shabasy *et al.* 2022).

The spread of COVID-19 and the ensuing pandemic resulted in extreme challenges to be faced at all levels of our society. Individuals, groups, companies, institutions and governments constantly received and issued different types of information about the growing global crisis. The media at large played a key role in communication: narratives carry the responsibility and the power to determine what information to convey to the readers and how it ought to be represented.

The corpus collected newspaper articles downloaded from the *Times* in the period January 2020 - February 2022. Their quantitative analysis was carried out employing Sketch Engine (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/>), a software that uses algorithms to process copious texts for the purposes of corpus analysis.

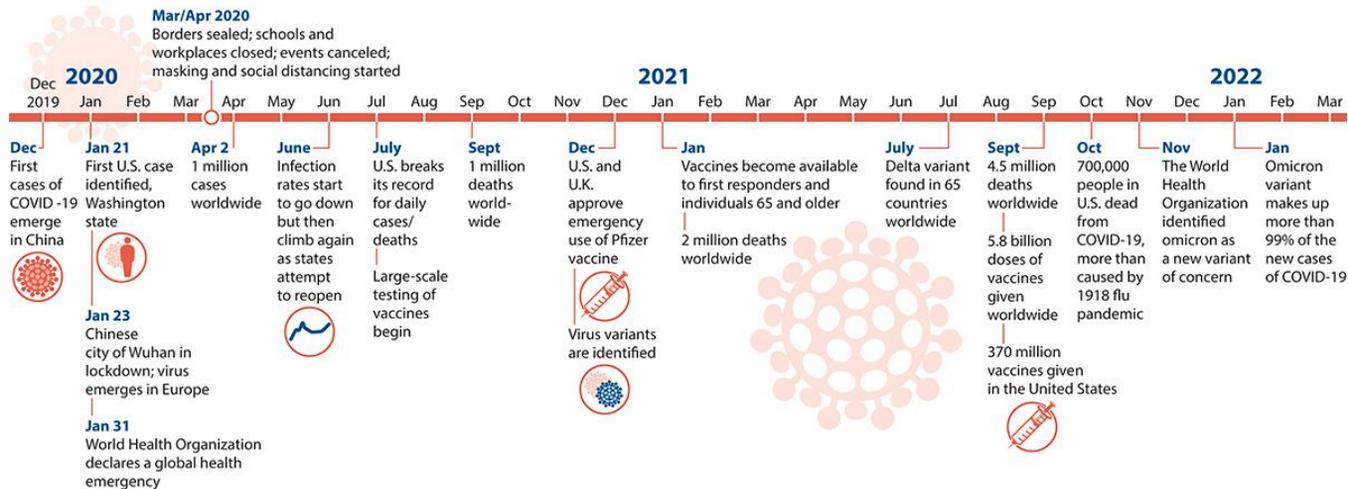


Figure 1. – COVID-19 timespan.
 Source: Macmillan <https://covid19.macmillanlearning.com/>

The general framework of the diachronic analysis was the three-stage life cycle of a crisis (Fink 1986), mirrored by a ‘crisis communication’ cycle, divided into a pre-crisis phase, a crisis communication phase, and post-crisis communication (Coombs 2010). Thus, for the aim of this paper, the time span considered was divided into three stages: January-September 2020, October 2020 - February 2021, December 2021 - February 2022.

The present paper focuses on two research questions:

- RQ1. How was the COVID-19 crisis depicted in newspaper articles?
- RQ2. How did its representation evolve over time?

After defining what constitutes a crisis and its corresponding communication cycle in section 2, section 3 focuses on the corpus and its prominent features. Then, notable language variations across the periods selected are analysed and discussed, and conclusions are drawn.

2. DEFINING A CRISIS

Previous research has indicated that there is no one unanimously acknowledged definition of the term crisis (Coombs 2010, 18). Although it is a widely used term, it is semantically vague and challenging to examine systematically.

According to the *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>), crisis most commonly refers to a challenging or risky situation that requires close attention.

Applied to the context being considered in this study, the most appropriate definition of a crisis might be that of “an unstable or critical time or situation that reaches an acute phase whose outcome will likely be adverse”. Given that it is a broad multifaceted term, it is no easy task to define the term *crisis* or choose a suitable synonym. The outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis was an unexpected occurrence characterised by the convergence of multiple events and consequences, requiring immediate actions and measures (Falkheimer and Heide 2010, 514), including restrictions, in the presence of a threat (Raboy and Dagenais 1992, 5), of a sequence of events leading to dramatic changes (Della Sala 2011, 2), of unpredictability and uncertainty. Crises are objective but also subjective, as their meaning changes based on people’s individual and collective perceptions, on their cultures, society, time and place, causes, complexity, and impact (De Rycker and Mohd Don 2013).

Material actions and language use, communication and discourse patterns all profoundly influence the handling of crisis avoidance, monitoring, management and resolution (Coombs 2010, 18; De Rycker and Mohd Don 2013, 3). They produce new texts, genres and discourse types, thereby changing existing ones. Crises are recontextualised, built and portrayed, together with the social actors involved; they are “socially shaped [...] in organizational political and media discourses, in public and private spaces, in front-stage and back-stage contexts” (De Rycker and Mohd Don 2013, 5, 29). Thus, such a system becomes critical in the construction of readers’ opinion and sentiments, as it affects people’s concerns, feelings of threat, uncertainty, vulnerability and loss of control (Denti 2021; Wodak 2021).

Several scholars claim that governments must be held responsible for being incapable of preventing such crises by means of suitable measures (Levenson 2020). With new regulations and measures being implemented, which people were required to comply with, they were often legitimised by the need to increase safety (Wodak 2021, 5), even though they were sometimes considered as being in violation of people’s rights. These issues will partially emerge from the corpus analysed but need to be further investigated taking into consideration political communication (Musolff *et al.* 2022; Thielemann and Weiss 2023).

Crises follow developmental stages: they erupt, emerge, develop over time and come to an end (Mitroff 1994). These phases will be highlighted in the corpus together with the corresponding steps in communication during the COVID-19 crisis.

2.1. *Crisis management and communication*

As already mentioned, crises are socially and discursively construed, grounded in changing socio-cultural and historical contexts that, according to Hart (2011, 1), are made up of “the set of cognitive representations that discourse participants have of the world”.

Social actors build crises through narrative and discourse, through “processes of crisis identification, crisis definition and crisis constitution” (De Rycker and Mohd Don 2013, 11). Thus, crisis communication is critical in managing the crisis itself. This means that, on the one hand, media and politics state (and often overstate) crises, and, on the other hand, people expect guidelines on what to do, plan and say in order to increase safety and “fight the enemy” (Wodak 2021, 2). Spreading infor-

mation and awareness about a crisis such as a pandemic is particularly difficult as health issues involve social, cultural and psychological aspects, including emotions and dreads. Thus, communication is often strategically designed by experts and stakeholders, and public and private objectives and interests may conflict (Conrad and Barker 2010, S67; Garzone 2021, 159-160).

Information is provided through numbers, statistics, rankings and ratios, but also rhetorical strategies aiming to persuade citizens to strictly follow new regulations and restrictive measures implemented by governments to fight the crisis, i.e., the pandemic (Wodak 2021, 8).

The analysis of a crisis management process helps understand crisis communication.

Coombs (2010, 25-46) identifies a three-stage life cycle of a crisis and its corresponding crisis communication cycle. He distinguishes:

- A pre-crisis phase, which entails *signal detection*, *prevention*, and *preparation*: the location, expectation and decrease of crisis risks and threats. In terms of communication, this means collecting information about crisis risks, decision-making on how to manage potential crises, and training people involved in the management process.
- The crisis communication/response phase, which refers to the acknowledgement of the cause and the necessary response. This involves the current situation, the communication during the crisis, and future outcomes, the collection and processing of information for decision making and the design and diffusion of crisis messages. This is the most important communication stage as how and what knowledge is disseminated during the crisis has a significant impact on the consequences of the crisis in terms of reputation.
- The post-crisis phase refers to actions organised in normal conditions. This includes supplying stakeholders with follow-up information, contributing to research, learning from experience. It also entails handling the consequences of the crisis, communicating necessary changes to individuals and providing follow-up crisis messages.

After describing the main characteristics of the corpus, the following section will apply the framework introduced to stress how the discourse of crisis communication changed over the time span selected.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1. *Corpus and methodology*

The articles for the corpus were downloaded around the keyword *COVID-19* in the NexisUni database: a total of 20,149 articles from *The Times* (thetimes.co.uk). The choice of *The Times* is linked to some previous studies on COVID-19 and popularisation strategies in *The Times* and in the *Financial Times* (Denti 2020; 2021). For the purposes of this paper, three subcorpora were compiled using Sketch Engine (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/>):

1. JAN-SEPT20, in the period 20 January - 30 September 2020, characterised by the outbreak of the pandemic and the increase in both death rates and mandatory restrictions;
2. OCT20-FEB21, in the period 1 October 2020 - 28 February 2021, defined by the launch of vaccines;
3. DEC21-FEB22, in the period 1 December 2021 - 28 February 2022, marked by the beginning of some improvements.

All articles have an approximate length of 300-1200 words, totalling 21,122,662 tokens and 17,480,900 words. The key reference corpus is English Web 2021 (enTenTen21), containing 52,268,286,493 tokens, used to identify key items and multiword expressions.

Table 1. – *Corpus statistics.*

	JAN-SEPT20	OCT20-FEB21	DEC21-FEB22	TOTAL
Tokens	12,178,288	7,051,435	1,892,939	21,122,662
Words	10,300,411	5,569,089	1,611,400	17,480,900
Sentences	444,147	226,778	66,633	737,558
Documents	12,036	6,155	1,958	20,146
# per month	1,337.33 (9)	1,231 (5)	652.66 (3)	1,185 (17)

Table 1 compares the statistical features of the three subcorpora.

The first subcorpus (JAN-SEPT20) covers a period of nine months, with a total of 12,036 articles and an average of 1,337 documents per month.

The second subcorpus (OCT20-FEB21) embraces a shorter period of five months, with a total of 7,051,435 articles and an average of 1,231 documents per month.

The third subcorpus (DEC21-FEB22) is composed of 1,958 articles in total, with an average of 653 documents per month.

A first observation to make is the steady decrease in the number of articles on COVID-19 published from the beginning to the end of the time span considered, from the outbreak of the pandemic to the first consistent signs of recovery. This is in line with the three phases of crisis communication: first, collecting as much information as possible and informing people about all the issues that emerge and how to prevent the spread of the pandemic; second, releasing strategic communication concerning the current situation and the responses, i.e., vaccination; and third, dealing with the consequences of the crisis, communicating necessary changes and providing follow-up information that is the result of what has been studied and learnt.

All articles containing the keyword COVID-19 have been included. This means that they may be specifically on the pandemic, on its origin and spread, on all the consequences and on how governments have been dealing with it, or COVID-19 may be a secondary issue. Initially, the idea was to only collect documents with titles containing keywords strictly related to the pandemic, such as COVID, COVID-19, coronavirus, virus, lockdown, isolation, immunity, pandemic, etc. However, sometimes they were associated mainly with certain geographic areas or topics which did not make the corpus representative. Other times, apparently irrelevant titles hid significant information. Thus, despite the pitfalls of using such a large, and maybe more general, corpus, the final decision was to consider all documents, placing greater emphasis on the development of language over time.

As highlighted in a previous study on intertextuality in COVID-19 crisis management in newspaper articles (Denti 2021), these articles address both expert and non-expert readers, are characterised by the functions of informing, narrating and persuading, typical of news discourse, and by those of informing, evaluating and predicting, typical of financial discourse (Denti and Fodde 2013). Another dominant feature is the presence of networks of genres (Swales 2004), of intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Bhatia 2008; Fairclough 2012; Denti 2021, 250; Garzone 2021), especially the domains of the News, Medicine, Economics and Finance, Politics, and Nature/Science. Metaphors play a significant role in the discourse of COVID-19 (Garzone 2021; Semino 2021), but they have not been analysed in this paper.

Within the three-phase framework, DA and CA (Swales 2004; Bhatia 2008; Fairclough 2012; Wodak 2021), both quantitative and qualitative

analyses were carried out around frequencies, the Wordlist, Concordance and Word Sketch tools of Sketch Engine, and a close reading of the texts, which will be presented in the following section.

3.2. Data analysis and discussion

A search for the word *crisis* and its synonyms *junction*, *exigency*, *emergency*, *contingency*, *pinch*, *strait* (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>), revealed lower frequencies than one would expect. More frequent synonyms, such as COVID-19, coronavirus, virus, pandemic, will be further analysed below.

Table 2. – “Crisis” frequency.

Frequency / Relative Frequency per 1 m. tokens						
Item	JAN-SEPT20		OCT20-FEB21		DEC21-FEB22	
crisis	8,193	672.75	2,069	293.41	412	217.65
junction	24	1.97	8	1.13	5	2.64
exigency	5	0.41	1	0.14	1	0.52
emergency	3,115	255.78	1,076	152.59	294	155.31
contingency	186	15.27	95	13.47	25	13.20
pinch	82	6.73	24	3.40	8	4.23
strait	39	3.20	17	2.41	3	1.58
TOTAL	11,644		3,290		748	

Table 2 shows their occurrences in absolute and relative terms per 1 million words. *Crisis* comes in 172nd position, with 8,193 occurrences in the first period, 391st with 2,069 occurrences in the second period, and 527th with 412 occurrences in the third one. Its synonyms are less frequent, especially *exigency*, *pinch* and *strait*, whose values, singularly considered, are meaningless. However, considering *crisis* together with its synonyms, the totals disclose more significant positions: between 12th and 13th in the first period, 25th and 26th in the second, 306th and 307th in the third. These numbers also unveil an expected fall in references to the concept of a crisis, as the pandemic is being managed and things are changing for the better. Common collocations with *crisis* were identified through Word Sketch (Table 3) and the three periods were compared. The reference marker was the typicality score, used to denote the collocation strength: the higher, the stronger. Lower scores meant the words in the collocation often combine with other words.

Table 3. - "Crisis" collocation.

Modifiers of crisis					
COLLOCATE	SCORE	COLLOCATE	SCORE	COLLOCATE	SCORE
corpus: covid_19_ jan_sept20	57,3	corpus: oct_2020_ febr_2021	64,2	corpus: covid_19_ dec21_feb22	74,5
financial	11,3	financial	10,77	financial	10,58
coronavirus	11,05	economic	10,11	staffing	10,2
Covid-19	10,98	Covid-19	9,98	cost-of-living	9,67
global	9,54	coronavirus	9,71	Covid-19	9,55
current	9,24	global	9,19	global	9,07
health	9,23	Covid	9,03	health	8,73
economic	9,04	health	8,84	supply	8,46
Covid	8,97	existential	8,16	scheduling	8,3
present	8,43	credit	8,07	chain	8,27
existential	8,19	obesity	7,92	opioid	8,27
public	7,96	current	7,89	Covid	8,26
national	7,87	present	7,86	migration	8,25
unprecedented	7,77	banking	7,76	mental	7,92
obesity	7,65	bad	7,68	present	7,89
virus	7,63	national	7,67	pandemic	7,81
bad	7,59	winter	7,58	Suez	7,72
banking	7,44	housing	7,43	impending	7,7
housing	7,34	historic	7,43	economic	7,67
previous	7,23	Covid19	7,34	list	7,67
immediate	7,01	immediate	7,31	workforce	7,61

Looking at the first 20 modifiers of *crisis*, Table 3 shows how *financial* has the strongest score in all the three periods, because the pandemic has been compared to the 2008 financial crisis in that it has induced another global financial crisis. As for the following modifiers, the first two periods have similar modifiers but with different rankings. While in the first the focus is on the *present* and *unprecedented* situation involving the world (*global*), *health*, *economy* and the lives of people (*existential*), in the second the public's concern about the economic situation grew, including anxiety for the *credit*, the *banking* and the *housing* systems. *Obesity* was an important comorbidity factor in contracting COVID. *Unprecedented* has been partially replaced by *historic*, which represents

the acknowledgment of the pandemic, of its causes, consequences and response. *Winter crisis* refers to the possibility of a new spread due to the cold weather. The third period shows some different collocations. After *financial*, *staffing* has the highest score, and *workforce*, further down, is semantically related to this. In fact, the coronavirus caused a crisis in terms of personnel getting sick, personnel being fired or suspended for not getting vaccinated and people losing their jobs, which, in turn, created deficiencies in the NHS:

- (1) Suspected heart attack and stroke victims are being told to get a lift to hospital rather than wait for ambulances as the Covid staffing crisis threatens to cripple response times. (thetimes.co.uk January 4, 2022)

Supply and (supply) *chain* are linked to the lessening of restrictions and the slow restart of business activities, while *scheduling* is linked to sports seasons and the difficulties in planning new sports calendars.

Moreover, as the effects of the crisis combined, they led to the increase in *opioid* consumption:

- (2) The opioid crisis has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Experts have blamed the toll on financial, social and mental health factors, with the ensuing repercussions on housing and employment. (thetimes.co.uk December 6, 2021)

The *mental* (health) crisis is another consequence of the pandemic, requiring actions on the part of counsellors, teachers and parents.

The adjective *bad* began to appear in the first period, increases in the second and almost disappears in the third. Mainly used in the form of its superlative *worst*, e.g., *the worst crisis*, *the worst humanitarian crisis*, *the worst peacetime crisis*. Its use accompanied the development of the pandemic and the communication strategies adopted: its detection, spread and follow-up phases.

As for the other collocations, in the period January-September 2020, *crisis* premodifies nouns such as *management*, *hit*, *mode*, *end* and *response*, describing how governments are tackling the crisis since it first hit, both at local and global level. And one question is often repeated: given the crisis mode, is it working and when will the crisis end?

- (3) Coronavirus lockdown: is it working and when will the crisis end? Scientists are tackling the next big question: how to ease restrictions without triggering a new wave of infections. (thetimes.co.uk March 29, 2020)

The most frequent verb collocations represent the idea of *facing* (*tackle*, *handle*, *address*, *navigate*) a *looming* and *exacerbating* crisis, of *managing*

it and of *overcoming* (*solve, weather withstand*) it and its ensuing crises. Most verbs using *crisis* as the subject are semantically related to a strong impact on everyone and everything: *hit, begin, cause, affect, expose, force, lead*.

The period October 2020 - February 2021 experienced two coronavirus waves and the general awareness of living through the worst pandemic since the 1918-20 Spanish flu took hold. People feel tired (*crisis exhaustion*) and having reached a *crisis point*, a *response* needs to be decided on.

	Details	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	doc#0	ment policies in the face of an impending cost-of-living	crisis	are tax rises - national insurance and freezing the high
2	doc#0	meaningful discussions.</s><s>"A full on cost-of-living	crisis	is coming down the tracks and nothing that I've seen n
3	doc#1	fer window while City will hope the worst of their injury	crisis	is behind them.</s><s>Euros on the horizon Brighton
4	doc#2	spending on clothes may suggest that the cost of living	crisis	is already prompting households to cut back on spend
5	doc#2	can losses from the pandemic.</s><s>The hit from the	crisis	has not been as bad as feared, however, allowing Nat
6	doc#4	intecare as a concern.</s><s>"The growing waiting list	crisis	is a symptom of overcrowding," a spokeswoman said.</
7	doc#5	and has raised investor hopes that an end to the health	crisis	is in sight.</s><s>It marks the best annual performanc
8	doc#12	nfection numbers.</s><s>He warned us that the Covid	crisis	was likely to go on well beyond March 29.</s><s>"It co
9	doc#12	oses during the 12 months to April.</s><s>The opioid	crisis	has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic Page
10	doc#15	dy Europe's biggest travel group claimed the Covid-19	crisis	was behind it as summer bookings surpassed preparand
11	doc#15	" a short-term dampener Page 2 of 2 Pandemic travel	crisis	is behind us, says Tui ", but he said bookings were pic
12	doc#16	l the rest of the world can finally declare that the Covid	crisis	is behind us."</s><s>It also warned about the damage
13	doc#17	</s><s>On the plus side, the worst of the supply chain	crisis	is abating.</s><s>The Baltic Exchange Dry Index, the
14	doc#18	in which the government gives the impression that the	crisis	is over when in actual fact there is huge disruption con
15	doc#18	remoir of 30 years on the road, told The Times that the	crisis	was solely down to the pay and conditions many truck
16	doc#19	able clubs to postpone games in the midst of the Covid	crisis	are no longer fit for purpose.</s><s>"They were well-fr
17	doc#20	orded in April 2020.</s><s>After almost two years, the	crisis	is not yet over.</s><s>Load-Date: January 15, 2022 E
18	doc#21	tified as the most imminent threats, while looming debt	crises	are expected to pose more of a risk to stability in the m

Figure 2. – “Crisis” concordance in the third period (Sketch Engine).

Verb collocations are similar to the previous period, with predicate verbs identifying change and verbs introducing causal argumentation. Causal relations are an attempt to understand why and how all the phenomena that evolved around the COVID-19 breakout occur.

The period December 2021 - February 2022 was when the results of the last two years of *crisis mode* emerged, i.e. when discussion began

about what had been done and what should have been done to *tackle*, *resolve*, *survive*, *address*, *face* the crisis, and what needed to be done to mitigate the growing *cost of living crisis* and *manage* the multiple crises that were brought about by the pandemic.

Figure 2 shows some of the *crisis* concordances in this interval. The cost of living, waiting lists, health, travel and supply chain are the main concerns but there are some positive signals of recovery and of the pandemic being “behind us”.

The following sections will investigate in more depth precisely how communication and language changed over the time span taken into consideration. Given the unexpected, fast and cyclic development of the pandemic, the three phases sometimes overlap, especially the first two, because governments had to quickly face the spread of the coronavirus and of its pervasive effects.

3.2.1. The pre-crisis/beginning of the crisis phase

As already mentioned, January-September 2020 marked the pre-crisis/beginning of the crisis phase, meaning the appearance of the coronavirus in specific geographical areas, the difficulties in predicting its possible spread and the identification of actions and measures to prevent it, in order to reduce its risks and threats. For governments worldwide this entailed urgently trying to understand what was happening and how to fight it as rapidly as possible, even introducing extraordinary and harsh measures such as lockdowns. As regards communication, this meant gathering information about the risks of the pandemic, decision-making on how to manage potential resulting emergencies, training people involved in the management process, and to persuade people to abide by the new rules. Governments’ reputations were also at stake. This period partially overlapped with the second one in terms of identifiable communication phases. Events moved quickly, including two waves of contagion and two lockdowns, and how and what knowledge was disseminated had a significant impact on the consequences of the crisis and the respective reputation of government authorities.

The first communicative choice had to do with the specific language used to identify the virus. Considering the first 50 keywords, *coronavirus* was the term with the highest ‘keyness’ score (106.4). Keyness refers to how the word is considered key in its context. *Covid-19* was quite far down (43.37), followed by *virus* (23.5).

Among the 50 most recurrent words of this period's Wordlist, *Covid-19* is slightly more frequent than *coronavirus* with a relative frequency per million tokens of 1,802.8 compared to 1,737.7 for the latter, followed further down by *virus* (1,014.7), *pandemic* (800.9) and *crisis* (672.7).

The keyness of the word *coronavirus* is reflected in the titles of the articles of this period, being the most frequent one in a total of 3,328 instances, 2,044 of which are in thematic position, to highlight the relevance of the word and of the topic, and to be catchy and memorable. Most are followed by (in+) the geographical place or nationality, a proper name or a linked topic:

- (4) Coronavirus_Trump adviser Anthony Fauci calls for handshake ban. (thetimes.co.uk April 9, 2020)
- (5) Coronavirus in Ireland_Lockdown restrictions 'like Nazi Germany', O'Doherty tells court. (thetimes.co.uk May 5, 2020)
- (6) Coronavirus_Wuhan's schools reopen as lockdown eases further. (thetimes.co.uk May 5, 2020)
- (7) Coronavirus in Scotland_Union demands screens to protect teachers in class. (thetimes.co.uk June 24, 2020)

These titles occur in 28 percent of the total documents, and thus play a significant role in terms of the spread of the topic, of the stance towards it, and of the political issues conveyed. References to politics increasingly appear throughout the documents. There are continuous references to the different UK governments and countries, distinguishing between Britain, Scotland, and Ireland, their political systems or ministers, their different situations and approaches, and all the political issues and tensions that arose. The names of the Prime Ministers, their offices, building names and addresses, of Parliament headquarters and national symbols are broadly used to create lexical cohesion and to politically divide (Denti 2021, 254). Ireland and Scotland are directly addressed in the title about 4 times more frequently than Britain and England. This is only partially explained by the fact that it is a British newspaper. It also has a political importance. Wales is barely present.

The words *Covid* or *Covid-19* appear in 835 titles (7 percent only), 82 times in thematic position. Indeed, *coronavirus* is more used at the beginning of the pandemic, as the contrasting data in the following periods will show.

The other most important keywords detected are *lockdown* (82.3), often postmodified by *restriction* or *measure*, *furlough* (52.232), *self-isolat** (71.3), *distancing* (37.4), often accompanied by *social*, *facemask*

(35.4), *quarantine* (25.6), *two-meter* (25.4), *sanitiser* (24.9), which have to do with the first measures applied by most governments to fight COVID-19. While most of them were applied to prevent people from suffering health issues, *furlough* refers to the measures adopted to avoid job losses. The term *furlough* was adopted to refer to employees being suspended due to a company's economic condition or lack of work; their salaries were temporarily paid for by the government.

Another keyword, specifically present in the first months of the pandemic, is *outbreak*, with the emotional connotation of a sudden burst, astonishment and fear caused by the virus, often enhanced by the premodifiers *coronavirus*, *Covid-19*, *virus*, *Sars*, *local*, *serious*, *future* and *worst*. It also collocates with action verbs such as *contain*, *localise*, *control*, *tackle*, *prevent*, *fight*, all aiming at stopping and managing it.

Among the first 50 keywords, *NHS* (National Health Service), *PPE* (Personal Protective Equipment), *ventilator*, *HSE* (Health Safety Executive), *NPHET* (National Public Health Emergency Team for COVID-19), all relate to health issues, policies and procedures to help patients both inside and outside hospitals, as well as medical staff, teachers and all people working with the public.

The highest score in this multi-word keyness list is for *care home* (76.3), as these bodies suffered from proportionately higher contagion rates and had to accommodate and take care of all the patients released from overcrowded hospitals. To the same semantic field belong expressions such as *second wave*, *intensive care*, *coronavirus death*, *infection rate*, *confirmed case*, *coronavirus case*, *death toll*, *spread of the virus*, *case of the virus*, *coronavirus test* that describe the focus and the negative sentiments in the news throughout this period: the outbreak of the pandemic, the spread of the contagion, the need for intensive care, the high rate of deaths ultimately caused by the virus.

The people involved in decision-making form another group of key single words and multi-word expressions: *Boris Johnson* and *Mr Johnson*, *Matt Hancock* or the *Health Secretary*, the *Scottish government*, *Nicola Sturgeon* or the *First Minister*, *NHS staff*, *Holohan* (Ireland) and *Whitty* (England) or the *Chief Medical Officer*, *Health Minister*, *World Health Organisation*, *Public Health England*, *Health Minister*, *scientific adviser*. Authorities and institutions, doctors and experts, are regularly quoted and referred to in the articles. This helps confer authoritativeness to the information reported, build trust in the reader (Wilson 2003).

The identification of the people involved in the crisis at all levels is one of the main foci of all articles of all three subcorpora. In fact, *people* is the

word with the highest frequency in the first period, and the second one in the other two, after *year*. Time and people are the most important issues in crisis management: to act fast and learn from the past in order to better forecast what to expect next. It was paramount to help people, to train people and persuade them to follow the rules, even when they seemed to limit or deprive people of individual rights. Thus, in addition to the political system and the health system, *people* collocates with *young, old and elderly, vulnerable and infected, disabled, normal, healthy*; with *schools and universities, businesses and the market; children, workers, experts, the country, the family and the community*. The pandemic affects everybody's lives, both in the private and in the public spheres, as an individual, as a local or an international community. People needed to be *helped, encouraged, advised, protected*, but also *stopped* from engaging in dangerous behaviours and instead *forced* to follow the rules (Denti 2021, 252-253).

3.2.2. The second period

October 2020 - February 2021 was characterised by the crisis communication/response phase, i.e., the recognition and acknowledgement of the pandemic and of its causes, and how to react. This involved identifying the current situation and future outcomes, then subsequently collecting and processing information to start vaccination campaigns, planning and spreading the right messages. At this point, communication still had a crucial role, especially in persuading people to get vaccinated.

The second subcorpus has several features in common with the first, but also new ones. The word *coronavirus/es* has an even higher keyness score of 233 against 75 for *Covid* and *Covid-19*. The word *coronavirus* appears in 758 titles, 524 of which in thematic position. They represent just above 12 percent of 6,155, the total number of documents in this period, while 1,082 have *Covid* or *Covid-19* (18 percent of the total), of which 230 are in thematic position. Some of them overlap, as both expressions are present. In comparison with the previous period, notwithstanding the significant functions of *coronavirus* in crisis communication, the expressions *Covid* and *Covid-19* were starting to replace it, opting for the virus's official name.

Some new entries are represented by the new names of politicians and, more importantly, by the vocabulary and names of vaccines: *AZN, Astrazeneca, vaccine, jab, immunization, pharmaceuticals, vaccination, Pfizer-Biontech* and some of the codes of the pharmaceutical industry.

The focus had undeniably changed, but the uncertainty concerning the efficacy of vaccinations was still very strong:

- (8) The Covid-19 vaccination plans will cost UK taxpayers at least £11.7 billion, the public spending watchdog says. [...] Each vaccine contract includes some indemnity protection for the makers in case of legal action arising from adverse effects caused by the jabs. (thetimes.co.uk December 16, 2020)

The first 50 multi-word expressions of this period are very similar to those of the January-September 2020 subcorpus, but with lower keyness scores. *Pharmaceutical preparation* has the highest score of 131.21, after *covid-19 coronavirus* and *covid coronavirus*, followed by *covid-19 coronavirus vaccine*, *sector performance*, *covid-19 coronavirus regulation*, *pharmaceuticals industry*, *naics32541 pharmaceutical preparation manufacturing*, *naics325412 pharmaceutical preparation*, and *pharmaceutical preparation manufacturing* further down. Certain new keywords refer to *sector performance*, *wholesale trade*, *recreation event* and *stock index*, looking at how the economy is doing and trying to pull through. These data show a step forward both in terms of crisis management and communication function. International actors such as Mr. Biden and the European Union are also present in this list, as there is a broader outlook at the crisis by more closely considering what the other countries are doing and experiencing, especially the EU and the USA.

The most frequent lexical verbs are mainly reporting verbs (*say, tell, report*), typical of news discourse, action verbs (*do, make, go, take, get, give, lead, leave*), verbs of opinion (*think, know, find, feel, ask, believe*), trend verbs (*remain, fall, continue, rise, return, increase*), the verbs *mean* and *lead* which are very important in newspapers' popularisation strategies to explain difficult concepts. The use of verbs does not vary much in the three subcorpora, due to their function in this genre.

The same trend is identified in the use of adjectives and adverbs. They can be classified into evaluative, both positive and negative (e.g., *more, good, positive, bad, low*), even though the former are more recurrent and *bad* is frequently used in its superlative *worst*; identifying an upward or a downward trend, an improving or a worsening situation; temporal (e.g., *now, always, then, again, recent*); adversative (e.g., *but, however*), intensifiers (e.g., *further, significant*, much, far*), and modals (e.g., *probably, possibl*, perhaps*). Sometimes they are slightly vague (e.g., *high, large, big, small*) (Denti 2021). What changes across time is their frequency but there is little change in their position in the list. Therefore, their value

and function remain. Again, one explanation may be the cyclic trend of the pandemic and of the virus's variants.

3.2.3. The third period

December 2021 - February 2022 was characterised by the post-crisis phase, i.e., planning and implementing actions and measures in normal conditions, and the beginning of more concrete evidence of recovery, despite the many issues that were still to be solved. It included providing people with follow-up information, contributing to research, learning from experience, but also coping with the consequences of the pandemic, communicating necessary changes to individuals and the communities and providing follow-up messages (Coombs 2010):

- (9) Covid restrictions are ending, so what's the new etiquette? (thetimes.co.uk February 17, 2022)

In this period, *coronavirus* appears in only 25 titles (14 times in thematic position), just above 1 percent of the total 1,958 documents, while *Covid* or *Covid-19* 527 times, i.e., 27 percent, 172 times in thematic position. This means that *Covid* and *Covid-19* have replaced *coronavirus*. This change in language use is probably due to the coinage of COVID-19 by the World Health Organisation to specifically indicate this new coronavirus and was employed by the medical community. However, it took a little longer before it was disseminated and popularised in everyday language.

The keyword *outbreak* changes collocates, especially as object of verbs. The outbreak is not something to be fought and controlled, but something to look back at and from which people have learnt.

Mental, *economic* and *workforce* are also referred to in a different way: they reflect a change in focus, more about the wider consequences of the pandemic and its implications for society, rather than the immediate public health threat.

Some nouns acquire relevance, such as *end*, referring to the end of restrictions, of mask use, etc., *Omicron*, the new variant, *test*, with an increase in the use of testing in all fields as everything reopened and restarted, from sports to businesses and recreational activities.

The third subcorpus shows a higher frequency of adjectives identifying an apparently new positive perspective towards the future: *positive* does not appear in the first 50 positions of the previous subcorpora, *great*, *low*, representing good results in terms of falling death rates.



]	① doc#0 the vaccination programme.	His Shrewsbury squad has one of the highest take-ups in the country.	📄
]	① doc#0 now expected to be not less than £69 million."	That is 56 per cent higher than in the previous year, which had fallen marginally during the initial mor	📄
]	① doc#0 ding cost-of-living crisis are tax rises - national insurance and freezing the	higher rate threshold of income tax - that will exacerbate it.	📄
]	① doc#0 : resulting from such a huge price increase would cut spending, hitting the	high street as well as VAT receipts.	📄
]	① doc#0 n that route.	They say, however, that the number is likely to be far higher .	📄
]	① doc#1 ic of Ireland to "deliver the best value for customers".	2 Shell cashed in on high gas prices to deliver bumper trading profits in the fourth quarter, fuelling re	📄
]	① doc#1 er what can be done to address the root cause.	6 Inflation has hit a record high in the eurozone , driven up by a mixture of higher gas, electricity and food	📄
]	① doc#1 3 Inflation has hit a record high in the eurozone , driven up by a mixture of	higher gas, electricity and food bills and the surging cost of imported goods.	📄
]	① doc#1 stments other than shares can provide protection against the possibility of	high and long-lasting inflation.	📄

Figure 3. – “High” concordance in the third period (Sketch Engine).

However, *positive* sometimes has an optimistic, though cautious connotation; other times it is associated with *test/testing/tested*:

- (10) How should people behave next week? “With cautious optimism,” Jones says. Things look positive for now. (thetimes.co.uk February 17, 2022)
- (11) Upon their return to the UK, several players tested positive, causing their match against West Ham to be postponed before Christmas. (thetimes.co.uk January 8, 2022)

The same thing occurs with *low*, which is also employed to indicate the negative aspect of poorer self-esteem in people, especially teenagers. Thus, adjectives do also still report negative trends. *High*, mostly used in its comparative or superlative form, with reference to the previous years or months, functions both as an intensifier and as a booster (*Fig. 3*).

In conclusion, the language of the third subcorpus shows the comeback of sports seasons and tournaments, as well as high street shopping, cinema, and recreational activities. Thus, some important upward trends are present. However, people and governments still need to be cautious.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 crisis became global not only in terms of boundaries but also because of its global media visibility. The media played a decisive role in the communication flows about COVID-19 to both expert and non-expert readers. The present paper has tried to highlight the three stages of this crisis management and its communication flows were observed in the corpus analysed, endeavouring to emphasise each period’s features.

The first period is characterised by the unknown to be coped with and the coming fight against the enemy (Denti 2021; Wodak 2021), by narratives that affected people’s emotions and behaviour, that informed and disinformed the public, spawning conflicts and ambiguities that led to the absence of the univocal, clear and shared stances needed to encourage constructive behaviour to overcome the pandemic. As is well known, a consistent number of people around the world reached the point of denying the existence of the disease itself.

The second period emphasises a more informed management of the crisis, the need to face the effects of the pandemic especially from a health, safety and economic point of view, and the beginning of vaccination campaigns.

By the third period the readers’ opinion and sentiment, the social implications of the pandemic i.e., concern, feelings of threat, uncertainty,

vulnerability, and loss of control, that permeate the corpus, had improved. Vaccination, the availability of funds, and the establishment of actions and measures by the governments contributed to gaining people's consensus and faith in their politicians, although the need for safety and security still remains. While many consequences need to be solved and cautiousness is required, the future is seen as more *foreseeable, bright, post-pandemic* and *long-term*. However, every crisis is unique and the boundaries between the stages are not always clear cut.

Crisis models are like stage models of conflict (Folger *et al.* 2009, 74-79), and crises are made up of segments with predictable actions and behaviours, a sort of a crisis script, suggesting management and resolution strategies. However, the outbreak and surge of the pandemic was extremely fast and pervasive and positive and negative trends of the disease alternated back and forth over time. This led to an unpredictable development that had an effect on communication flows, which in turn affected how the crisis unfolded.

Future research will have to take into consideration not only the politicisation of the crisis but also newspapers' political affiliation.

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A Micro-Diachronic Corpus Investigation of Violence-Related Metaphors Used to Frame China during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The article explores Sinophobic discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing specifically on violence-related metaphors used to frame China in American and Australian newspapers from January to June 2020. Specifically, the analysis aims to investigate the extent to which violence-related metaphors were used to frame China in a micro-diachronic perspective and the functions they performed in the dataset. The investigation was conducted by combining corpus linguistics and discourse analysis approaches to analyse the semantic domain of violence. The results revealed that violence-related metaphors were extensively used to negatively frame China and its institutions in both corpora, although they were more frequent in the Australian corpus. From a micro-diachronic perspective, in the American corpus, violence-related metaphors were less recurrent and evenly distributed over time, whereas they peaked in May 2020 in the Australian corpus, a time that coincided with China's imposition of substantial tariffs on Australian barley. This seemed to suggest that the use of such metaphors was highly influenced by socioeconomic factors rather than by the spread of COVID-19.

Keywords: corpus-assisted discourse analysis; framing; metaphor; Sinophobia; war metaphors.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and the increase of hate incidents against people with East-Asian appearances around the world (e.g., NYPD *Hate Crime Reports* 2020) have raised interest in possible COVID-19-related Sinophobia. Sinophobic discourses and ‘Yellow Peril’ narratives are not novel to Western media as the concept of ‘Yellow Peril’ dates back to the late 19th and early 20th century (Kawai 2005) and was found to be pervasive in different media sources across time (Shim 1998).

More specifically, diachronic studies on representations of China in Western media have revealed slightly different attitudes. A study conducted by Peng (2004) showed that in the 80s China tended to be framed as a promising economic partner due to its economic growth and hence, an overall positive representation of China seemed to prevail in Western news discourses (Mackerras 1999). However, after the protests that took place in Tiananmen Square, China tended to be portrayed as an “authoritarian communist regime whose brutality could not be overstated” (Goldstein 2005, 2) and its representations in news media seemed to have remained overall negative ever since (Peng 2004). Furthermore, the spread of SARS and COVID-19, both acknowledged to have originated in China, seemed to have enhanced the presence of Sinophobic discourses in Western media (Leong 2003; Le *et al.* 2020).

Recent studies investigating Sinophobic discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the presence of belligerent metaphorical frames in media representations of China. Specifically, they explored the use of war-like narratives to frame economic tensions between the U.S. and China (Chen and Wang 2022). Furthermore, Frauen (2021) found that war narratives seemed to be linked to imagery of threat which contributed to portraying China as an evil entity in the U.S. public sphere. Despite this recurrence of war frames, little attention has been paid in the literature to how WAR and VIOLENCE frames vary across media from different countries.

Accordingly, the analysis aims to provide a further contribution to the studies of Sinophobic discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic by exploring the extent to which violence-related metaphors, namely metaphors involving WAR and VIOLENCE scenarios, were used in West-

¹ Small capitals are used throughout the article to represent conceptual levels of metaphorical interpretations (e.g., frames, scenarios, and conceptual metaphors) following the convention often seen in metaphor studies. Linguistic metaphors are underlined.

ern media to convey a negative image of China² during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this paper focuses on violence-related metaphors, an over-arching term used to encompass metaphorical expressions involving the concepts of violence and aggression, which were used to frame China in the most widely read American and Australian newspapers during the first six months of 2020. Additionally, since the diachronic studies mentioned above (e.g., Peng 2004) showed that representations of China in Western media have predominantly remained unfavourable over time, a micro-diachronic perspective is added to detect whether the distribution of such metaphors varied throughout the first stages of the spread of COVID-19. Specifically, the analysis addresses the following research questions:

- (i) To what extent are violence-related metaphors used to frame China in American and Australian newspapers?
- (ii) What functions do such metaphors perform?
- (iii) What insights can the micro-diachronic perspective add to the use of such metaphors?

2. METAPHORS IN MEDIA DISCOURSES

Metaphors can be defined as “the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else” (Semino 2008, 1). This definition presupposes a cognitive view of metaphor according to which metaphors do not only occur at a linguistic level but also at a cognitive one (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Accordingly, linguistic metaphors identified in discourse can be considered linguistic realisations of conceptual metaphors (e.g., *she is in high spirit* is a lexical realisation of the conceptual metaphor HAPPY IS UP). Discourse analysis scholars have emphasised the role of metaphors in conveying certain ideologies and evaluations (Fairclough 1995; Liu and Li 2022), specifically focusing on their framing effect, defined as emphasising “some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman 1993, 52).

² The word China is used throughout the article to refer to People’s Republic of China.

News media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion (Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013). The way news is framed, or presented, can greatly influence how people perceive issues and their causes (Entman 2004). Furthermore, news media can contribute to building a particular image of a country (Kleppe, Mossberg, and Grønhaug 2014) and disseminating ideologies. Accordingly, several studies on metaphorical framings were conducted to explore the use of metaphors in news stories, focusing on the representations of topics such as climate change (e.g., Atanasova and Koteyko 2017) and migrants (e.g., Musolff 2015), hence shedding light on how metaphors may impact public understanding and discourses.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of hate incidents against people with East-Asian appearance has raised interest in how media discourses may have influenced their target audience by disseminating Sinophobic discourses in different countries (e.g., Gong *et al.* 2022). Studies on Australian media have found that more reliable media outlets have predominantly portrayed China's efforts against COVID-19 in political and ideological terms rather than as a matter of public health, while tabloids have relied on conspiratorial, racist, and Sinophobic narratives (Sun 2021). Furthermore, investigations on Australian political discourses have witnessed a revival of Sinophobia, which seemed to be rooted in the racist conception of 'Yellow Peril' (Ang and Colic-Peisker 2022), a stereotype that can be defined as the West's fear of people with East Asian descent (Kimura 2021). As regards American media, China has often been framed as a rival to the U.S. in economic terms (Chen and Wang 2022). Specifically, trade between the U.S. and China has often been conceptualised in terms of war (Boylan, McBeath, and Wang 2021). Specifically, the rivalry between the U.S. and China has not only been represented as a trade war but also as a technological competition for leadership in technological innovation (Nguyen and Hekman 2022). Such belligerent metaphors have a crucial role in the construction of two juxtaposed groups of social actors (Kellner 1995) and can possibly emphasise both the positive aspects of an in-group, metaphorically constructed as the allies, and the negative aspects of the out-group, framed as the enemies. This frame can potentially lead to discriminatory discourses when it highlights the positives of the in-group and negatives of the out-group (van Dijk 1999).

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The studies mentioned in the previous sections suggested that the use of war frames in news media may be connected to economic tensions with China (Peng 2004; Chen and Wang 2022). Hence, two countries holding strong economic connections with China³, namely Australia and the United States, were selected for the analysis. Newspapers were chosen considering their readership and long-standing tradition⁴. Accordingly, The American Corpus (AmCorp) comprised articles from *The New York Times* (NYT) and the *Los Angeles Times* (LAT), while the Australian Corpus (AusCorp) included articles from the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) and the *Daily Telegraph* (DT). To ensure the dataset adequately reflected potential shifts in discourses on China over time, the first six months of 2020 were selected. This time frame encompassed the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the first waves of its spread in both countries⁵. During this period, all articles related to China in the newspapers under inquiry were compiled to create an ad-hoc corpus for the analysis. The collection resulted in two corpora of 1,701,511 (AmCorp) and 1,114,750 (AusCorp) tokens in total.

The analysis aimed to analyse violence-related metaphors framing China. The over-arching term ‘violence-related’ was used throughout the article to define metaphorical expressions that drew upon the concept of violence, aggression, or physical harm and conveyed abstract or non-physical ideas and situations. Within this definition, WAR metaphors referred to situations involving conflicts and battles, and were realised by means of linguistic metaphors such as *battle*, *attack*, etc., while VIOLENCE metaphors encompassed a wider range of violent acts and physical harm which were not just limited to war-like situations and were expressed through linguistic instances such as *brutal*, *aggressive*, etc.

To investigate these expressions, the analysis combined corpus approaches to the study of metaphors in discourse (e.g., Semino 2008;

³ Strong economic relations were based on import and export data retrieved from the website of the Centre d'études prospectives et d'informations internationales (CEPII), from <http://visualdata.cepii.fr/CountryProfiles/fr/?country=Etats-Unis> and <http://visualdata.cepii.fr/CountryProfiles/fr/?country=Australie> on the 21st of June 2023.

⁴ To identify the most read newspapers in the United States and Australia, the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM) and Enhanced Media Metrics Australia (EMMA) were consulted respectively, whereas the long-standing tradition was determined referring to the dates of foundation of the newspapers.

⁵ Data retrieved from <https://covid19.who.int/explorer> on the 20th of June 2023.

Cameron and Maslen 2010) and hence can be regarded as a corpus-assisted discourse study (Partington 2013). Given the large size of the corpus, the semantic annotation tool WMatrix 5 (Rayson 2008) was used to extract word types and multi-word expressions⁶ which belonged to the semantic field of violence in the two corpora. Specifically, WMatrix 5 relies on the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS), a tagging programme created to automatically assign a semantic category label, or semantic tag, to every word or phrase within a corpus (Semino *et al.* 2018). Specifically, in this study, the USAS tag *E3- Violent/Angry* was selected, as it was proved to provide a list of words potentially conveying belligerent metaphors (Semino *et al.* 2018). Additionally, this USAS tag was also a key semantic domain in both corpora (according to Log-Likelihood statistics) if compared to the default British National Sampler (BNC Sampler Written) available in WMatrix 5.

WMatrix 5 was used to produce two wordlists of all words and multi-words (e.g., phrasal verbs and compounds) tagged with the semantic label of *E3- Violent/Angry* in the two corpora under inquiry. Specifically, it identified 613 and 529 word types belonging to the semantic domain of violence in the AmCorp and AusCorp, respectively. Once the lists of words were extracted, their concordances (150-span on WMatrix) were closely investigated to detect both indirect and direct metaphors (Steen *et al.* 2010) at a lexical level. To recognise metaphors, an adapted version of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (Pragglejaz Group 2007) was followed. Similes were also included in the analyses as they were considered direct metaphors referring to the definition provided in the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) (Steen *et al.* 2010). Accordingly, single words and phrasal verbs were regarded as individual lexical units, and their contextual and basic meanings were identified by referencing the *MacMillan Dictionary* and the *Longman Dictionary*, which are traditionally used when applying the MIP (Pragglejaz Group 2007) and MIPVU (Steen *et al.* 2010). Following the MIP (Pragglejaz Group 2007), when the contextual meaning of a lexical unit contrasted with its basic meaning, the word was marked as metaphorical. For instance, in the metaphorical expression *China is now hitting back*, the basic definition of *hit back* implies a physical aggression. However, the contextual meaning of *hit back* does not imply an actual physical aggression and hence contrasts with the basic meaning. When the comparison

⁶ See Archer *et al.* 2002 for a full description of how lexical units are recognised in the UCREL Semantic Analysis System.

of the two domains was nonliteral and involved two distinct domains, like in the case of similes, the units were considered direct metaphors as in the following example *it is like kicking a ball from here to there*. In cases where the concordances did not provide sufficient contextual information to understand the meaning of the lexical units, the whole texts were read. Furthermore, only the concordances of the content words of the wordlists provided by WMatrix were analysed, while auxiliary verbs (e.g., *do*) and proper names (e.g., *Belt and Road*) of any kind were excluded from the analysis.

After recognising metaphorically used words, a cognitive level of analysis was added to interpret source and target domains referring to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Specifically, the source domain is defined as the more concrete concept that serves as the basis for creating a metaphor, while the target domain is described as the more abstract domain that is being framed and described through the source one. For instance, in the conceptual metaphor *TIME IS MONEY*, *TIME* is the target domain being described in terms of the source domain *MONEY* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Only metaphors which encompassed China, Chinese people and their actions in their target domains were included in the analysis (e.g., conceptual metaphor: *A NATION/CHINA BEHAVIOUR IS A BULLY BEHAVIOUR*; lexical realisation: *Hong Kong has accused China of using “mafia”-style tactics to bully banks*, SMH, June 2020). This cognitive step was added to ensure that the metaphors selected for the analysis framed China, its institutions, and Chinese social actors.

Since the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) does not really account for naturally occurring metaphors in their context of use (Kövecses 2020), many scholars tried to combine the CMT with critical analysis perspectives (e.g., Charteris-Black 2004; Koller 2004) to investigate metaphors in discourse. Accordingly, this study partly drew on the integrated approach to metaphor analysis provided by Semino, Demjén, and Demmen (2018) and included lexical, cognitive, and discourse perspectives. Accordingly, after having interpreted metaphors at a conceptual level and in order to address their discursive implications, the analysis referred to the concept of scenarios introduced by Musolff (2006) who defined them as “a set of assumptions made by competent members of a discourse community about ‘typical’ aspects of a source-situation” (*ibid.*, 28). For instance, in the source domain *MARRIAGE/LOVE* different specific sub-domains can be recognised such as the *END-OF-HONEYMOON* scenario. Similarly, referring to the previous example of the *BULLY*

BEHAVIOUR, a related scenario could be the SCHOOLYARD scenario, which recalls playground dynamics involving bullies and implies that within the SCHOOLYARD frame, various social actors are involved (e.g., kids being bullied, kids who torment other presumably smaller kids). These target concepts are also reflected in the source situation, which is that of international relations among countries. Hence, in the example, China is represented as a kid tormenting smaller weaker kids, namely other countries. This level of analysis refers to more specific contexts of use of metaphors and is particularly helpful for analysing their specific implications in discourse.

The result section shows the distribution of violence-related metaphors in the January-June 2020 period and discusses metaphors used to frame China, Chinese social actors and their actions in discourse. Specifically, results are divided into two sections corresponding to the most recurrent types of social actors or actions involved in the target domains of such metaphors. Specifically, the first section focuses on metaphors used to frame China and its institutions (frequently referred to as Beijing or China in the corpora). These metaphors mainly involve violent personifications or THREAT metaphors used to frame both China and people working for Chinese institutions. A second section of results includes metaphors used to frame actions and measures taken by the Chinese government to contain the spread of the virus. These metaphors mainly involve health measures or campaigns conceptualised in terms of violent actions. All frequencies presented in the article are normalised per 10,000 words.

4. VIOLENCE-RELATED METAPHORS IN THE JANUARY-JUNE 2020 PERIOD

The analysis of the concordances uncovered 608 and 578 metaphorically used words in the AusCorp and AmCorp, respectively. These correspond to a metaphorical use of 7% in the AusCorp and 4% in the AmCorp. Although the Australian newspapers analysed seemed to rely more heavily on violent metaphors when representing China, both the AmCorp and AusCorp made an extensive use of violence-related metaphors to frame China during a time when it was the receptacle of hatred for being the initial location where COVID-19 started to spread. Although violence-related metaphors are commonly used by news media to frame international relations among countries (e.g., Nguyen and Hekman

2022), representing China and its social actors engaging in violent behaviours may have contributed to a negative perception of them.

To interpret the data in a broader context, it was crucial to consider significant real-world events. Firstly, one would expect that the use of those metaphors may have varied with the spread of the disease in the countries under inquiry. According to the World Health Organization (2020a), the first cases were initially identified in China in December 2019 and quickly spread throughout the world. Although the first cases in the United States and Australia were registered in January (World Health Organization 2020b), both countries saw a considerable increase in new cases in March, when the WHO officially classified the outbreak as a pandemic. Surprisingly, it appeared that the usage of violence-related metaphors to frame China decreased during the initial peaks of spread of the virus instead of increasing.

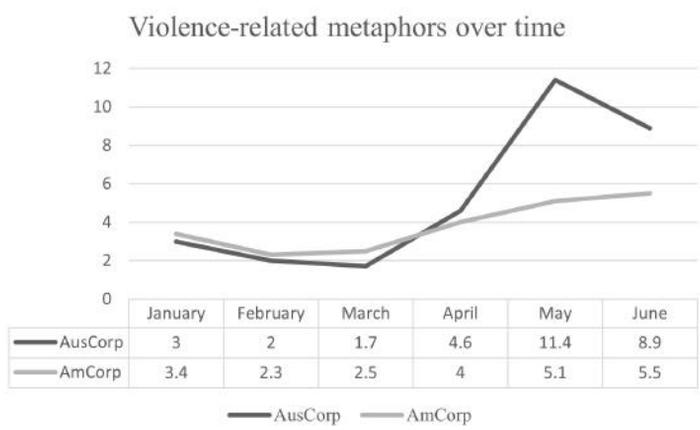


Figure 1. – Normalised frequencies of violence-related metaphors in the January-June 2020 period.

Specifically, Figure 1 shows the normalised frequencies of violence-related metaphors in the dataset and their distribution in the January-June 2020 period. To provide a practical example of the metaphors shown in Figure 1, in the AusCorp, China was repeatedly represented as an aggressor in a WAR scenario in which Australia was presented as a passive recipient of China’s attacks (e.g., *China would prefer to buy us than to fight us, ultimately it does want to dominate us*, DT, June 2020). As the graph shows, in the AusCorp, such metaphors were used with the normalised frequency of 3 in January which decreased to 2 in February and

1.7 in March. In April, the number of metaphor occurrences increased to 4.6 and reached a peak in May (11.4), and a slight decline in June (8.9). In the AmCorp, violence-related metaphors occurred with a frequency of 3.4 in January and decreased to 2.3 in February. Similarly to the AusCorp, the AmCorp witnessed an increase in the use of violence-related metaphors in the last three months of the analysis, with an increase to 4 in April, 5.1 in May and 5.5 in June. Therefore, a significant rise in the presence of violence-related metaphors was registered in both corpora in May and June.

In the AmCorp, the steady increase in the use of violence-related metaphors may be connected to both the social unrest that mounted in Hong Kong with the protests against the national security law that was later approved on the 30th of June (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government 2020) and the steady increase of new cases of COVID-19 in June 2020⁷. However, several articles on Hong Kong were published in April, May and June, which were also the three months when the use of violence-related metaphors increased in the AmCorp. Furthermore, such metaphors seemed to be used mainly to report and frame the national security law and China's response to the social unrest as violent attacks on Hong Kong's freedom (e.g., *violating Hong Kong's autonomy*; *brutish assaults on key institutions of Hong Kong*; *attacks on the civil rights of Hong Kongers*). Although war metaphors were also frequently employed throughout the whole corpus to frame the trade war between the U.S. and China (e.g., *frictions between Washington and Beijing over trade*), it seems that in the AmCorp, the steady increase in the use of violence-related metaphors may be related more to the social turmoil in Hong Kong than to the increase in COVID-19 cases.

In the AusCorp, the distribution of violence-related metaphors was slightly different. As *Figure 1* shows, a significant increase in the use of such metaphors was registered in May. In this month, Australia was not experiencing high numbers of new cases of COVID-19⁸. In fact, new cases seemed to have decreased compared to March and April. However, in May, China imposed tariffs on Australian barley (Cao and Greenville 2020). Furthermore, in the AusCorp, violence-related metaphors were used to describe how those tariffs and other Chinese economic poli-

⁷ Data retrieved from <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us> on the 20th of October 2023.

⁸ Data retrieved from <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/au> on the 20th of October 2023.

cies were *bitting* or *attacking* Australia and its economy (e.g., *China hit Australian barley producers; China can't explode the Australian iron ore trade*). Therefore, the increase in the use of violence-related metaphors in the AusCorp seemed to be related to the economic issues between the two countries rather than the spread of COVID-19.

As seen in the previous sections, many studies attribute Sinophobic discourses in news media primarily to the spread of COVID-19 and label them as COVID-19-related Sinophobia (e.g., Gong *et al.* 2022). The increase in new cases of COVID-19 can partially account for the presence of such metaphors in the AmCorp. However, the use of violent metaphors in the dataset seems also to depend on political or economic divergences, as well as socioeconomic factors (Sun 2021), and, as Kimura (2021) highlighted, negative representations of China may be connected more to ideological differences rather than public health concerns.

4.1. Violent metaphors and representations of China

4.1.1. China and its institutions as violent and threatening entities

China and its institutions were frequently portrayed as violent and threatening entities in both corpora. This tendency was also observed in previous studies which saw China being represented as a violent and brutal entity (e.g., Sautman 2021). This analysis confirmed this trend and found that metaphors framing China and its institutions correspond to 69% in the AmCorp and 91% in the AusCorp. Specifically, such metaphors were used in the dataset to repeatedly portray China and its institutions as violent people. Personifications can be insightful when they attribute specific human characteristics to the target elements they frame. In both corpora, China's governmental bodies, often referred to as Beijing and China, were metaphorically represented as people with negative human traits and conveyed imagery of threat. While the AusCorp seemed to make larger use of metaphors drawing from the source domain of PEOPLE, both corpora shared a tendency to depict China as a violent person using different lexical realisations, such as *brute*, *tyrant*, and *bully*. The underlying conceptual metaphor for these linguistic occurrences could be summarised as A NATION/CHINA BEHAVIOUR IS A BULLY BEHAVIOUR which can recall different discursive scenarios, such as a SCHOOLYARD scenario in which a bully torments smaller kids. Let us consider the following examples extracted from the AmCorp:

- (1) *Instead, Beijing is described, accurately, as a habitual and aggressive violator of that order – a domestic tyrant, international bully and economic bandit that systematically robs companies of their intellectual property, countries of their sovereign authorities, and its own people of their natural rights. (NYT, May 2020)*
- (2) *This election is going to be about who can stand up to China, the world's communist bully. (NYT, June 2020)*

In the AmCorp, the word *bully* was used metaphorically with a normalised frequency of 0.04. The most basic definition of *bully* in the *MacMillan Dictionary* is someone who frightens or hurts another person, especially over a period. Its contextual meaning was not specified in the dictionary but could be defined as an organisation or governmental body that uses its influence to threaten someone else to get what they want. In example (1), the BULLY metaphor was reinforced by the use of other metaphors referring to violent or socially unacceptable behaviours, such as domestic *tyrant*, and economic *bandit*. These metaphors depicted a highly negative representation of Beijing's actions and behaviour. Specifically, they framed China either as an aggressive person or as a criminal who engaged in oppressive behaviours by infringing on the intellectual property of companies, undermining the sovereignty of nations, and depriving its own citizens of their fundamental rights. Similarly, example (2) shows an instance of a reported BULLY metaphor where the addition of the adjective *communist* seemed to add a political dimension to the metaphor, possibly implying that China's political ideology is part of what is perceived as a bullying behaviour. This interpretation would align with Del Visco's (2019) argument, suggesting that negative framings of China may be driven by ideological divergences.

BULLY metaphors were also widely used in the AusCorp where they occurred with a normalised frequency of 0.5 and were particularly recurrent in May. Examples (3), (4), and (5) show some instances of this metaphor:

- (3) *But behind the charm China remains a bully-boy regime that will brutally squash those who do not toe its line. (SMH, May 2020)*
- (4) *Behind the charm, China is a bully – and we need to sell our wares elsewhere [...]. (SMH, May 2020)*
- (5) *Recent trade threats against Australia for calling an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 just confirm the nation is a thug and a bully. (DT, May 2020)*

In example (3), the word *bully-boy* was used to compare China's behaviour to that of a bully, resorting to aggressive and oppressive tactics when

dealing with those who do not share the same views. In the examples above, lexical metaphors, such as *bully-boy*, *bully*, *thug*, and *brutally squash*, portrayed China in a highly negative perspective, suggesting that China's actions were perceived as oppressive and violent. Furthermore, the use of *behind the charm* in examples (3) and (4) implied that despite China's appealing appearance as a trade partner its negative actions persist. All the examples above seemed to suggest that violence-related metaphors might be connected to trade disputes, such as the tariffs imposed on Australian barley (see Cao and Greenville 2020). Furthermore, they also represented those tariffs as China's intimidating and aggressive reaction to Australia's call for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 by specifically framing it as an aggressive behaviour typical of a *thug* or *bully* in example (5).

Other violent personifications of China included those implying physical actions and attacks which conveyed WAR scenarios as in the case of *hit back* which was metaphorically used with a frequency of 0.03 in the AmCorp and 0.07 in the AusCorp as in the following examples:

- (6) *China is now hitting back – it has expelled foreign journalists, attacked displays of racism [...].* (NYT, March 2020)
- (7) *China is a ruthless communist nation that will hit back hard if any other nation is perceived to be antagonistic.* (SMH, May 2020)

Both examples shaped China's behaviour as aggressive and ready to respond forcefully to various situations. In example (6), the action of expelling foreign journalists was portrayed as a physical act of aggression. Furthermore, the term *ruthless* in example (7) added a dimension of cruelty to the portrayal of China, which was also defined as a *communist nation*, a specification which seemed to link the violent metaphor to China's political ideology.

All metaphors mentioned above contributed to a negative portrayal of China by framing its behaviour as violent and hence conveying an image of threat. The domain of THREAT seemed to be highly connected to the representations of China in both corpora. This is not surprising, since previous studies already found threat scenarios in discourses on China (e.g., Lyman 2000; Philip 2010). Several lexical realisations of threat metaphors could be found in both the AmCorp and AusCorp, as in the following examples:

- (8) *Australia will acquire long-range missiles to protect overseas forces, allies and the mainland against rising threats including China.* (SMH, June 2020)

- (9) *But in recent months the Trump campaign has increasingly focused on its message of China as a villainous threat to American economic and security interests [...].* (NYT, May 2020)

As can be noted from examples (8) and (9), THREAT metaphors were mainly achieved through the lexical unit *threat*, which was metaphorically used with a normalised frequency of 0.9 and 0.3 in the AusCorp and AmCorp, respectively. In example (8), China was represented as a threat and recalled scenarios of POTENTIAL DANGER. The metaphorical use of *rising threats* implied an increase in perceived dangers related to China. example (9) reported a metaphor used in Trump's campaign where China was depicted as a *villainous threat* to American economic and security interests. Accordingly, such metaphors conveyed a sense of urgency and framed China as a malevolent entity that posed a significant danger to either Australian or American economic and security interests.

4.1.2. Health measures as violent measures

As seen in the section above, the two corpora shared similar tendencies in terms of VIOLENCE and THREAT metaphors associated with China and its institutions. However, they presented significant differences in how they framed the measures taken by the Chinese government to contain the spread of the virus. Specifically, metaphors used to frame actions and measures taken by the Chinese government correspond to 21% in the AmCorp and 13% in the AusCorp. Furthermore, in the AmCorp, containment measures that limited individual liberties (e.g., *quarantine, tracking of contagion, etc.*) were framed as violent actions, and metaphors were mainly produced within the source domain of VIOLENCE. Specifically, the adjective *aggressive* was used to attribute a certain degree of assertiveness to China's containment measures and was found in both the AusCorp (0.01) and the AmCorp (0.11). Let us consider two examples of the VIOLENCE metaphor in the corpora:

- (10) *Some alarmed public health experts have described Beijing's approach as draconian or brutal, but the W.H.O. has referred to it simply as aggressive.* (NYT, March 2020)
- (11) *But while authorities know they can't necessarily dodge the impact of the virus, they have attempted to minimise the damage with aggressive testing [...].* (SMH, April 2020)

In the examples above, health procedures were labelled as aggressive, suggesting that the containment measures adopted by the Chinese govern-

ment were restrictive. In example (10), the World Health Organization (WHO) was described as referring to Beijing’s approach as *aggressive*. While terms like *draconian* and *brutal* clearly carried negative connotations, *aggressive* implied a more nuanced stance, which may regard the measure as either effective or heavy-handed. In the AmCorp, there appeared to be a tendency toward a more negative view of these measures supported by various metaphor occurrences (e.g., *China’s leaders want to sell their heavy-handed methods as exemplary; its heavy-handed measures are testing the patience of its citizens*). Therefore, the use of *aggressive* might lean more towards interpreting the measures as heavy-handed rather than effective. In example (11), the expression *aggressive testing* is employed to describe authorities’ efforts to control the virus. Such metaphors seemed to highlight the coercive nature of the measures while downplaying their potential benefits in limiting the spread of contagion. Previous studies on media coverage of China’s handling of the pandemic also acknowledged the representation of China’s measures as heavy-handed (Jia and Lu 2021).

Despite this shared tendency between the corpora, the AmCorp made larger use of different linguistic realisations to frame containment measures (e.g., *brutal*, *draconian*, and *hell*). For instance, in the AmCorp, the quarantine period in Wuhan was conceptualised in terms of HELL (0.02) as in the following examples:

- (12) *Wuhan in particular is still reeling from what one resident described as a “living hell”.* (NYT, March 2020)
- (13) *Quarantine is one of the many waiting rooms of life, and its own special circle of hell for people raised with the illusion that we control our destinies.* (NYT, March 2020)
- (14) *Beijing has meanwhile made a hero out of Wuhan, the sacrificial city whose people struggled and died to stop a virus and save the nation. [...] “It was hell,” Yang said.* (LAT, May 2020)

In example (12), a resident described Wuhan as a *living hell* emphasising the distressing picture of the conditions in Wuhan at the height of the pandemic, probably referring to the lockdowns and overwhelmed health-care systems. In example (13), quarantine was framed as a *circle of hell* and underscored the sense of helplessness experienced by people during quarantine. In example (14), the HELL scenario was also evoked by Wuhan being described as a *sacrificial city* which experienced hellish conditions while combating the virus. This framing highlighted the sacrifices made by the people of Wuhan during quarantine and represented their efforts

as heroic. HELL metaphors compared the living conditions of quarantine or quarantined cities to those of hell, emphasising the distress caused by restrictive containment measures. On the one hand, they highlighted the difficulties faced by residents in Wuhan during the pandemic, and on the other hand, they conveyed the gravity of the health situation. In the AusCorp, no instances of metaphors produced in the source domain of HELL could be found.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results shed light on how violence-related metaphors were used to frame China in newspapers from two different countries. As regards the first research question concerning the extent to which violence-related metaphors were used to frame China in the newspapers, such metaphors were extensively used in both corpora. Furthermore, both countries tended to frame China and its institutions, or the containment measures taken by the government in terms of VIOLENCE. In particular, violence-related metaphors were more recurrent in the AusCorp if compared to the AmCorp.

Regarding the second research question on the functions these metaphors perform in discourse, violence-related metaphors in the dataset seemed to carry negative connotations and evaluations. Specifically, China and its institutions were frequently framed as violent and threatening entities, a tendency that was found also in previous studies on COVID-19-related Sinophobia (e.g., Sun 2021). Furthermore, China was portrayed as a violent person and was attributed negative human behaviours typically condemned in society, such as bullying and criminal behaviours. Additionally, THREAT metaphors used to frame China, already found in previous studies (e.g., Philip 2010), seemed to represent China and its economic policies as potential dangers in the dataset, creating imagery of urgency and hazard. Both corpora framed China's health measures as violent and heavy-handed, however, in the AmCorp, there was a stronger tendency to portray those measures in such a way as to highlight their restrictive nature, without considering the eventual benefits of them. Therefore, both corpora employed negatively connotated violent metaphors that seemed to reflect the newspapers' biases toward China, confirming a trend that was also observed by Jia and Lu (2021) in Western news media. Such metaphors depicted China as a violent and threatening entity and contributed to an overall negative portrayal of the

country. Previous studies highlighted the presence of negative representations of China in Western media (e.g., Lyman 2000; Peng 2004; Frauen 2021) and this investigation tried to underline the potential of metaphor analysis in examining recurrent framings in discourses on China which in the dataset, were mainly associated with imagery of threat and danger and discursively created a negative out-group.

Lastly, regarding the micro-diachronic perspective, the use of violence-related metaphors in the AmCorp seemed more equally distributed over time, although their use increased steadily over the last three months of the period, supposedly due to the news coverage of the protests in Hong Kong. In the AusCorp, the recurrence of violence-related metaphors reached a peak in May 2020, when China imposed substantial tariffs on Australian barley. Although the spread of diseases that originated in China, such as SARS and COVID-19, was found to enhance the presence of Sinophobic discourses in media (e.g., Leong 2003; Kimura 2021), the monthly distribution of violence-related metaphors in the corpora would suggest that the use of such metaphors was driven more by socioeconomic issues and ideological discrepancies rather than by the risk of contagion as highlighted by Del Visco (2019) and Sun (2021).

Although the study suggested that political divergencies may have a great impact on the use of such violent metaphors, the micro-diachronic perspective of the analysis is limited to a monthly standpoint. A diachronic study should be conducted in the future to explore the use of such metaphors in pre-pandemic times to consider the extent to which COVID-19 influenced the dissemination of Sinophobic discourses in news media. Furthermore, WMatrix 5 has limits in recognising all words related to the semantic field of violence, especially when violence is implicitly conveyed. Therefore, a close-reading analysis of a smaller sample of texts could be carried out in the future to expand this study and include those metaphorically used words that were missed by WMatrix 5.

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Navigating Uncertainty

Social Media Narratives of Tourism during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the travelling restrictions put in place by governments had an unprecedented effect on tourism in South Tyrol, with stays from the main markets experiencing a loss ranging from -36.3% to -73.4%. The present study explores the English-language social media communication of tourist destinations in South Tyrol during the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak. To do so, a combined methodological approach is adopted, based on ethnographic interviews with practitioners of the tourism sector and corpus-assisted discourse analysis. The findings reveal that the deployment of future-oriented and corrective linguistic approaches to envision a post-crisis scenario is crucial in conveying hope and possibility. These findings not only enhance our understanding of tourism discourse in the context of communication crisis management but also have implications for the resilience of tourism industry during challenging periods.

Keywords: COVID-19; discourse analysis; ESP; social media; tourism communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism communication during the COVID-19 pandemic played a crucial role in keeping travellers informed, ensuring their safety, and managing the impact on the tourism industry. As the pandemic severely

restricted travel and physical interactions, various digital tools and platforms became fundamental to facilitate communication between tourists and tourism-related businesses (Gretzel *et al.* 2020), including local travel agencies, hotels, attractions, as well as public agencies for business location development, destination marketing and internationalisation (Pachucki *et al.* 2022).

It is widely recognised that social media became one of the most effective tools for the tourism industry in COVID-19 times providing key ways for the dissemination of accurate and timely information (Erdem 2021), such as acting as vital instruments for crisis management (Antony and Jacobs 2019), offering a platform for virtual travel experiences (Blaer 2023) and different meaningful ways to engage with customers (Kwok, Lee, and Ha 2021), facilitating community support (Mele, Filieri, and De Carlo 2023) and providing functional visual spaces for collaboration and partnership between tourism businesses, influencers, and content creators (Femenia-Serra, Gretzel, and Alzua-Sorzabal 2022).

While the significant role of social media in destination marketing is widely acknowledged (Zeng and Gerritsen 2014; Ryden *et al.* 2019; Lalicic *et al.* 2020), little attention has been paid so far to how social media discourse can respond to the uncertainties of a global community as regards issues such as maintaining customer relationships and addressing the concerns of potential visitors (Gretzel *et al.* 2020). Taking the call for dedicated research endeavours in the complex field of social media discourse for tourism destinations (Pachucki, Grohs, and Scholl-Grissemann 2022), this study aims to give an insight into the strategies deployed by the tourism organisations of one of the main international tourism destinations included in UNESCO's World Heritage List to address international visitors in English during the pandemic.

The autonomous Province of Trentino-South Tyrol is world-renowned for the uniqueness of its natural landscapes, a quarter of which classified as protected natural areas. It comes as no surprise that the tourism industry is one of the most developed sectors of the local economy, generating up to the 11.4%¹ of the local GDP (ISTAT 2022). In 2019 alone, more than 7.7 million arrivals and 33.7 million overnight stays were recorded in the region. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the travelling restrictions put in place by governments had an unprecedented impact on the local tourism, with stays from the main markets (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Benelux) experiencing

¹ http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCN_SQCT [03/10/2023].

a loss ranging from -36.3% to -54.8%, while stays from other countries dropped by -73.4% (ASTAT 2021).

As part of a wider research project on English as an international language for tourism in South Tyrol, this study investigates how social media re-shaped their content for tourism communication in English during the first phase of the pandemic. Specifically, it explores the discursive strategies adopted by local tourism professionals to transcend the barriers of physical distance and travel constraints while fostering interest and enhancing reach among international travellers. Two research questions are addressed by this study:

RQ1. What was the impact of the pandemic on the English-language social media communication of tourist destinations in South Tyrol?

RQ2. What discursive strategies were used to engage international tourists online during the first lockdown?

The present paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides an overview of the theoretical background adopted for this study, while section 3 illustrates the data and the methodology used to collect them; section 4 illustrates and discusses the empirical results; section 5 is dedicated to the concluding remarks and implications for further research efforts.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research on digital tourism communication has shown that the travel and tourism industry has effectively embraced the internet and harnessed its diverse range of opportunities to enhance their operations and engage with customers. The utilisation and maximation of these opportunities have been instrumental in transforming the industry and improving the overall travel experience for consumers. In fact, travel businesses have leveraged platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to connect with their target audience, build brand awareness, and promote their offerings. What makes social media highly attractive is their real-time interaction capabilities, enabling travel companies to engage with potential customers in a direct way. Global surveys² indicate that this direct engagement has helped foster a sense of trust and authenticity, influencing travellers³

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/222698/consumer-trust-in-different-types-of-advertising/#statisticContainer> [12/07/2023].

decisions and generating word-of-mouth recommendations (Liasidou 2018). Moreover, information technology has enabled the development of online booking systems, which has streamlined the booking process and empowered consumers, thus fostering a more independent approach to travel organization (Maci 2018). Yet, in order to optimise their marketing efforts, promote their value and attract more visitors, tourist organisations need to adopt “adequate and convincing linguistic ways” (Maci 2020, 69).

Over the years, the tourism industry has developed its own discourse, characterised by a high degree of persuasiveness. According to Virtaen and Halmari (2005), persuasion can be defined as a set of linguistic behaviours that seek to either modify the thinking or behaviour of an audience or reinforce their existing beliefs. This is particularly true for tourism discourse, considering that its ultimate purpose is to sell a product, the idea of something “off-the-beaten-track” (Maci 2020, 61). When persuasive strategies are successfully implemented on tourist websites, they have the potential to induce behavioural changes among tourists and visitors, and significantly influence their decision-making process. To achieve this goal, destination advertisements must attract the attention of potential tourists, stimulate their interest, make the product appealing, and ultimately convince them to commit in choosing a destination (Manca 2016).

Linguistic resources, particularly words and phrases, can play a crucial role in promoting destinations. For instance, it can create different feelings in travellers and help them finalise their decisions (Maci 2013, 2018; Zakharova 2021). *Ego-targeting* is a specific technique of the language of tourism aimed at making the readers targeted by the promotional text singled out from the crowd and transformed into individuals, thus evoking a sense of uniqueness or privilege (Dann 1996; Manca 2016; Maci 2020). This technique is realised with the deployment of specific linguistic strategies, such as direct forms of address, the use of an informal tone and the imperative mood, which are commonly adopted to shorten the distance between the author and the addressee creating “an illusion of informality and familiarity” (Maci 2007). For instance, through imperative verbs, the author explicitly and directly encourages the readers to join and immerse themselves in experiencing a destination (Sulaiman 2014). Ego-targeting is also employed to reduce tourists’ anxiety about travel, thus protecting them from the hazards associated with unknown places and people (Dann 1996). This is particularly true in relation to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which generated the disruption of the entire tourism sector.

involving tourists in Easter-related events in person, stressing that they do not want to give up the traditional preparations. In doing so, they try to neutralise this unfavourable discourse and protect themselves from the negative effects that a possible attitude of resignation or inaction might produce.

The emphasise-the-positive strategy is closely linked to the linguistic tools that speakers utilise to express evaluation and affect (Hunston and Thompson 2000; Martin and White 2005). Both can be either positive or negative and can be realised through a wide range of language resources, including adjectives (e.g. *happy, sad*), verbs (e.g. *want, fear*), nouns (e.g. *fight, passion*) and adverbs (e.g. *regrettably, hopefully*). In communication, evaluation and affect hold a crucial position in creating understanding and establishing a sense of closeness with the listener. In this context, they serve as a crucial tool for implementing the emphasise-the-positive approach, as demonstrated in example (2).

- (2) *Sadly* for many, this is *not an easy time* and many find it *difficult* to maintain optimism for the future. [...] Especially in times of crisis, even *small rays of light* can help, and *wonderful sunny days* ensure that spring comes to our valley.

By using emotionally loaded words, speakers empathise with the audience, demonstrating sensitivity and understanding. Furthermore, evaluation associated with images of light and spring is used to express solidarity and optimism. The example above therefore counts as an instance of emphasise-the-positive strategy.

In the frame of the present study, it appears interesting to ascertain how tourism professionals' social media communication approach during the first critical months of the pandemic fit the paradigm of tourism and crisis discourse strategies, specifically the typical ego-targeting technique and trust-repair discourse model.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study draws on a combined methodology, where data collected through interviews with key informants working in South Tyrolean tourism marketing agencies are triangulated with a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of social media posts in English language published on tourism sites during the first Italian lockdown.

3.1. *Semi-structured interviewing*

The ethnographic part of the study involved conducting semi-structured interviews about tourism communication in English with a member of the PR Team and the coordinator of the Social Media Management Team of IDM South Tyrol, the major marketing agency supporting the development of small and medium-sized tourism organisations in South Tyrol. The vision and mission of the agency is “to promote the internationalisation and innovation of the South Tyrolean tourism industry”³. To achieve this, IDM offers support to all local tourism organisations by designing targeted marketing campaigns and providing communication guidelines. In order to be able to develop a keen understanding of the various themes related with the topic addressed, we opted for a semi-structured interview format as it allows informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms (Fylan 2005). The interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams on November 25th, 2022, recorded, digitally archived, and transcribed for future reference.

The primary aim of the interviews was to gain insights into IDM’s approach to social media communication during the initial stage of the pandemic, alongside exploring the role of the English language within that context. More specifically, the interviews intended to shed light on the digital communication objectives and strategies used to attract international tourists, as well as investigate to what extent these practices had evolved in response to the challenges posed by the public health crisis.

3.2. *Corpus design and composition*

The corpus comprises 544 posts written in English (25,020 tokens) manually retrieved between November 18th-21st, 2022 from the Facebook and Instagram accounts of a selection of South Tyrolean tourism organisations. As is characteristic of social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram facilitate interactions where users share horizontally flowing conversations, fostering new forms of interpersonal relationships. However, due to our focus on analysing communicators’ discourse strategies rather than user reception, our analysis exclusively encompasses the textual content within the posts. Comment threads associated with the posts were intentionally omitted from our corpus. Furthermore,

³ <https://www.idm-suedtirol.com/it/noi-siamo-idm> [12/07/2023].

despite the multimodal nature of Facebook and Instagram, we chose to concentrate on verbal language because the present study intended to find evidence and point out the discursive strategies adopted by South Tyrolean tourism organisations. Further steps in the research might shift towards the adoption of a multimodal perspective given the role of visual elements for meaning-making on social media platforms.

The selection of the organisations was based on the data reported by ASTAT concerning the number of arrivals and occupancy rates per origin and territorial unit in 2020, as well as on the posting frequency in English on social media platforms. The ASTAT tool allows filtering by tourism organisations, which made possible to elaborate a list of the most popular destinations in South Tyrol. At first, only the ones with an occupancy rate above 800,000 per year were taken into consideration, but the low number of social media posts in English made it necessary to lower the occupancy rate criterion to 200,000 (*Tab. 1*).

Table 1. – Number of social media posts.

TOURISM ASSOCIATION	FACEBOOK POSTS	INSTAGRAM POSTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF POSTS
Alta Badia Cooperative	57	40	97
Bolzano Tourist Board	65	53	118
Selva Val Gardena	22	29	51
Tourist Office Merano	19	24	43
Brunico Plan de Corones Turismo	60	22	82
Alpe di Siusi	35	34	69
Südtirol Alto Adige South Tyrol	25	59	84
TOTAL	283	261	544
TOTAL NUMBER OF TOKENS	9,314	15,706	25,020

Regarding the legal nature of organizations, the sample includes both public entities, like Bolzano Tourist Board and Tourist Office Merano, and private consortia (Alta Badia Cooperative, Selva Val Gardena, Brunico Plan de Corones Turismo, Alpe di Siusi, and Südtirol Alto Adige South Tyrol).

The posts collected were generated between March 8th, 2020 and June 9th, 2020, dates that respectively mark the beginning of the first Italian lockdown and the re-opening of the national borders.

All posts were selected by scrolling the social media accounts of the tourism associations listed above (*Tab. 1*) and manually saved in .txt format. Despite the limited size of the corpus, due to the brevity of the identified period and the restricted availability of material in English, our dataset can nevertheless offer a particularly useful insight given the peculiarity of the period, the sharp focus, the specificity of the cultural context explored and that it provides empirical evidence (McCarthy and Carter 1995; Flowerdew 2001; Sinclair 2004; Köster 2010).

3.3. *Corpus analysis*

All texts contained in the corpus were uploaded to the AntConc linguistic analysis toolkit (Anthony 2022) for corpus-assisted text analysis. A wordlist was generated to single out the most frequently used words and phrases which were thought to be indicative of the writers' linguistic preferences and communicative goals. Then their concordances were plotted and analysed to identify the most frequent textual patterns and discursive strategies in use within the theoretical frameworks on trust-repair discourse and ego-targeting technique specific of tourism discourse. It is important to note that at this stage of the project the corpus analysis did not entail a manual tagging process.

4. RESULTS

This section will illustrate the findings that emerged from the interviews conducted with the communication professionals from IDM as well as the results obtained from the corpus-assisted discourse analysis.

4.1. *IDM's communication strategy*

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic confined everyone between the walls of their houses, and all social gatherings slowly became a distant memory. In this unusual context, social media acquired an even greater importance as a way to stay connected with family and friends and quickly became the place for meeting up with friends and loved ones. In response to the larger use of social media platforms, South Tyrolean tour-

ism organisations had to increase their presence online by generating more content and by investing in technical developments to respond to their stakeholders' demands and needs, "for example, a lot of digital after-work drinks, gatherings with friends at home, there were a lot of live cooking sessions and so on [...]" (IDM Südtirol, interview, November 25th, 2022).

Not only did the pandemic trigger an increase in the use of social media platforms, but also a need to re-think digital communication goals and strategies. Not surprisingly but still worthy of notice, the interview revealed that English was not the first linguistic choice. Generating content in English seems not to be a priority at the moment due to the majority of South Tyrol tourist visitors coming from Italy and the DACH region (Germany, Austria and Switzerland). In fact, when generating content on social media platforms, Italian and German are typically the primary options. Nevertheless, English prevails in interactions on Instagram. This peculiar trend stems from the absence of segmentation based on the recipients' L1 within this particular social media platform. The case is different for Facebook, as it provides an automatic translation service, making it unnecessary to generate content in languages other than Italian and German.

Moreover, quite interestingly we observed that the communication strategy adopted during the first phase of the pandemic focused on the notions of unity and care. The analysis of the data shows a tendency to adopt a single voice representing the South Tyrolean tourism community as a whole, to both boost cohesion among tourism professionals in a time of uncertainty and convey a sense of reassurance to the online community. Creating content about what locals love about their land and traditions thus became a way to foster a sense of vicinity and shared passions. This approach stemmed from the need to face a new reality of isolation and restrictions as well as longing for meaningful experiences and human connection, which led to a transition to a different underlying notion. In fact, *dream now, travel later* was the new overall picture behind all digital communication initiatives launched during the first phase of COVID-19 pandemic. In a time of unprecedented travelling restrictions, dreams came to be the only means for disconnecting from the reality of the crisis, and for travelling through memories of past experiences. Promotional campaigns inviting tourists to visit South Tyrol turned inappropriate to the circumstances and seemed no longer strategic. As one of IDM's informants stated, "[...] we could no longer say 'come to us and have a beautiful holiday', we had to find new content themes [...]" (IDM South Tyrol, interview, November 25th, 2022).

Consequently, the conventional promotional tone of tourism communication, based on an overwhelming use of linguistic markers positively evaluating tourism destinations, was set aside in favour of a warmer and more familiar tone to foster a feeling of emotional proximity in a time of physical distance. This new approach to digital communication strategies could be read as a shift from appraisal strategies based on appreciation, that is on the aesthetic evaluation of contents, to those based on affect, or expressions of emotional states (Martin 1997; Martin and White 2005).

To meet the new communicative needs, IDM provided a set of guidelines to the local tourism organisations in the form of 5 checkpoints:

1. Racconta alle persone di te stesso. Le tue passioni e i tuoi hobby
(Tell people about yourself. Your passions and your hobbies)
2. Racconta perché fai qualcosa invece che dire cosa fai
(Say why you do something instead of saying what you do)
3. Condividi le tue convinzioni
(Share your viewpoints)
4. Condividi i tuoi sentimenti – ad esempio che ti mancano i tuoi ospiti
(Share your feelings – e.g. that you miss your guests)
5. Comunica sempre come se fossi un amico che parla a un suo amico
(Always communicate as if you were a friend talking to his friend)

(IDM *Re-Start* Campaign Guidelines 2021; our translation)

The most interesting innovation in IDM's communication strategy was the focus shift from *what* to say to the audience to *how* to convey a message instead. The attention moved to the tone of the message and to stressing the central role of feelings, passions, and friendliness in creating empathy and vicinity, with the primary objective of keeping the community engaged. IDM believed that the online community needed reassurance in a time of uncertainty as well as to feel close to who and what they love. Hence, during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, local tourism organisations started creating content regarding what people love about South Tyrol as part of the *#everythingwelove* campaign. The campaign, launched by the local tourist authority, invited visitors to share everything they loved about South Tyrol by posting photos and stories that evoked emotions and memories, thus engaging tourists through the exhortation "to appreciate the little things in life"⁴. By

⁴ <https://www.bolzanosurroundings.info/en/holiday-region/south-tyrol/-everything-we-love.html> [12/07/2023].

appealing to the cognitive-affective component and adopting a warmer and more familiar tone, social media posts aimed at operationalising the bond with the guests, implicitly catering for the construction of the overall tourist image and its great potential for online communications (Marine-Roig and Clavé 2016).

In addition, interview data showed a tendency to minimise content directly related to the pandemic. Posts that made explicit reference to the pandemic were only shared when new regulations were put in place to keep the online community updated. It was preferred to focus on memories and the hope of soon being reunited with those and things one loves. As one of the informants stated during the interview, “[...] it was our decision not to share on our channels only content related to the pandemic, because all the media were only talking about the situation [...]” (IDM South Tyrol, interview, November 25th, 2022). This approach could be considered a reflection of the local tendency to minimise the repercussions of the pandemic. In fact, during the coronavirus pandemic, South Tyrol had the lowest vaccination rate and the highest incidence rates in the country, even though the quality of public health care is considered above average (GIMBE 2021).

4.2. *Corpus-assisted linguistic analysis findings*

As a first step, a list of the most frequent terms in the corpus of social media posts was derived (*Tab. 2*). The choice was to focus on items most likely to convey the stance of communicators, and in particular on personal pronouns (*we, you*), possessive adjectives (*our, us, your*), modal verbs (*will, can*) and adversatives (*but*). Thematic words about the environment and for identifying places (*nature, Dolomites, South, Tyrol, mountain*) were not deemed relevant for the analysis, even if ranked among the 50 most frequently used words in the corpus under scrutiny. This choice was motivated by what IDM’s communicators pointed out to us during interviews: the pandemic marked a shift from *what* to *how*, i.e. from advertising products, or services, to sharing feelings and ideas, being the stance of the speaker more important than the content itself (see section 4.1). Thus, instead of focusing on the ‘aboutness’ of the corpus and on content words, which, in the present case, are merely characteristic of a specific geographic area and not indicative of any underlying linguistic preference or strategy, special attention was paid to discourse markers that may be reflective of the trend indicated by professionals.

Table 2. – Top 50 words in the corpus.

N	WORD	FREQ.	%	N	WORD	FREQ.	%
1	the	1,418	5.19	26	at	132	0.48
2	and	814	2.98	27	be	127	0.47
3	to	647	2.37	28	nature	99	0.36
4	of	538	1.97	29	have	94	0.34
5	in	493	1.81	30	Dolomites	94	0.34
6	a	407	1.49	31	South	90	0.33
7	we	370	1.35	32	can	83	0.3
8	you	350	1.28	33	bolzanobozen	79	0.29
9	for	267	0.98	34	but	78	0.29
10	are	252	0.92	35	time	74	0.27
11	is	248	0.91	36	do	70	0.26
12	our	223	0.82	37	good	69	0.25
13	with	216	0.79	38	by	69	0.25
14	this	189	0.69	39	summer	64	0.23
15	everythingwelope	160	0.59	40	mountain	64	0.23
16	us	158	0.58	41	as	64	0.23
17	it	158	0.58	42	Tyrol	63	0.23
18	your	152	0.56	43	or	61	0.22
19	all	150	0.55	44	about	58	0.21
20	on	142	0.52	45	again	56	0.21
21	from	140	0.51	46	what	55	0.2
22	alleswaswirlieben	137	0.5	47	its	55	0.2
23	will	136	0.5	48	has	54	0.2
24	that	134	0.49	49	these	52	0.19
25	quellocheamo	134	0.49	50	see	52	0.19

From the preliminary observation of the wordlist, it was interesting to notice that the words *COVID* and *pandemic* were not ranked among the first 50 most frequent words in the corpus. This is significant with reference to the local reaction to the sanitary crisis and in line with the local scepticism regarding the crisis (GIMBE 2021). Furthermore, it is validating evidence of the remark of IDM's informants regarding the preference for keeping COVID-19 related content to the minimum.

The corpus-assisted linguistic analysis revealed a frequent use of the first-person plural pronoun *we* (370 occurrences), ranking seventh among the most frequently used words in the corpus (Tab. 2). As a metadiscursive device, the first-person pronoun could serve writers with its inclusive and exclusive forms (Scheibman 2004). The inclusive *we* functions as an engagement marker, denoting the connection between the writer and the potential reader. Conversely, the exclusive *we* serves as a self-mention device, indicating the writers themselves as the agents. By examining concordance lines, it was possible to determine that most occurrences of *we* and *our* – two out of three – are receiver-excluding, i.e. they only encompass the writer’s identity, specifically the South Tyrolean tourism community. As stated by IDM’s informants, one of the key points of the communicative strategy adopted during the initial phase of the pandemic was to convey a sense of unity among the local tourism community by “speaking with one voice” (IDM South Tyrol, interview, November 25th, 2022).

The selection of adjectives used in combination with the phrase *we are* (36 occurrences) is representative of the stance adopted by communicators, which is one of resilience and emotional participation.

- (3) *We are confident* that all of us, together 🤝, will overcome this health crisis [...]. (Gardena FB 090320)
- (4) [...] Because *we are convinced* that after this crazy time, a little clean air, a little oxygen and a little beauty are the best possible cure. [...]. (Badia IG 070620)
- (5) *We are so happy* to share with you again this infinite playground that the Dolomites offer us! (Gardena IG 300520)
- (6) With a heavy heart we have to cancel the Seiser Alm Half Marathon 😞 *we are very sad*, but the health and safety of the runners is the most important thing for us 🙏 [...]. (Siusi IG 140420)

From the standpoint of trust-repair discourse theory, the strategic use of adjectives such as *confident* (3) and *convinced* (4) convey a sense of certainty and determination. These two instances can be regarded as manifestations of affect that align with the emphasise-the-positive strategy, as they contribute to promoting an image of commitment and trustworthiness. Similarly, the employment of emotional adjectives like *happy* (5) and *sad* (6) exemplify further instances of affect, albeit with the intention of establishing empathy and bridging the gap between the writers and the audience by expressing their emotions.

Interestingly, an instance of stance-taking was observed wherein the epistemic verb *know* (7) was employed. Although this is a single occur-

rence, its significance lies in its representativeness of how authors cultivate empathy and endeavour to establish trust with readers by recognising their viewpoint and expressing concurrence.

- (7) Close your eyes and let your mind free to travel... 🍷 We know, it's not the same, but currently traveling is not possible - #stayathome. (South Tyrol IG 250320)

You is the second personal pronoun in the frequency list (350 occurrences). The analysis of its collocates reveals the use of direct forms of address to directly engage with readers and through which web-readers are singled out from the crowd and emotionally involved according to the ego-targeting function conceptualised by Dann (1996).

- (8) Greetings from Merano! Today we wish *you* a good weekend, different from the usual: *you* cannot be here, but it is as *you* are always with us! 😊❤️ (Merano IG 170420)

The provided example (8) showcases the writer's effort to bridge the physical gap by emphasising a feeling of proximity, thereby neutralising any negative connotations. Additionally, the direct address to the reader fosters a sense of exclusivity, akin to conversing with a family member. This exemplifies the emotional and familiar tone consistently adopted by the South Tyrolean tourism industry during the initial phase of the pandemic, as suggested by our interviewees.

Ego-targeting is also achieved using imperative forms, which mitigate the perceived distance between communicators and readership.

- (9) *Smile* 😊 do *you* recognise the mountain in the background? (Bolzano IG 260320)
(10) *Imagine* *you* are hiking on a steep trail. Despite the sunshine, it's still cold at these heights. [...]. (South Tyrol IG 030520)

The writers encourage readers to *smile* (9) and *imagine* (10), employing verbs that evoke emotions, with the intent of providing solace amidst the challenges of the pandemic. Based on this observation, it seems that both instances align with the emphasise-the-positive strategy, by employing verbs that appeal to emotions, and evoking memories and dreams through the act of imagining.

Another interesting aspect that emerged from the corpus-assisted analysis is the frequent utilisation of the positive form of the epistemic modal *can* (83), particularly in conjunction with the second-person pronoun *you*. Within the corpus, *can* stands as the sole modal verb conveying

the notion of possibility, with no evidence of the usage of other epistemic markers. Building upon the previous discussion, the authors directly address their readers and, through the use of *can*, highlight activities that can still be done comfortably from home despite the pandemic-driven restrictions, such as cooking or virtually visiting a museum. The readers are portrayed as the main actors, being reminded of the various possibilities they still have in spite of the requirement to stay at home.

- (11) [...] There's no need to leave your house... you *can* do it comfortably from your sofa. (Badia FB 240320)
- (12) [...] If you want to try cooking a South Tyrolean lunch or dinner you *can* find all the recipes on the website <http://www.redrooster.it/en/farm-bars/recipes/> (Bolzano FB 240520)
- (13) [...] You *can* visit the museum in 45 minutes thanks to two apps with audio guide in Italian, German and English, one for adults and one for children. (Bolzano FB 270320)

In this regard, all three examples above show how feelings of isolation and idleness are mitigated by emphasising the positive, i.e. the numerous ways in which one can make the most of their time indoors. Furthermore, examples (12) and (13) demonstrate tourism organisations' desire to maintain a sense of connection between the community and the region, whether through references to local cuisine or by offering the opportunity to explore local museums via dedicated applications.

The considerable number of forward-looking statements identified within the corpus, realised through the use of *will* and the present continuous verbal forms, can also be ascribed to the emphasising-the-positive strategy, as they are used to express epistemic prediction of positively evaluated events in the future (*the intensity of nature, the magnificent Dolomites, the best experience possible*), as shown in examples (14-17).

- (14) [...] *We will now work* to be ready for the summer, to contemplate the intensity of nature and welcome the world. (Badia FB 090320)
- (15) In the coming days *we will try to do* our part in this, and virtually take you to the magnificent Dolomites [...]. (Badia IG 120320)
- (16) [...] *We are preparing* for the summer season and *we are waiting* for you! (Bolzano FB 200520)
- (17) [...] *We are all working* to make your holiday the best experience possible, to let you forget the difficulties and to give you the deserved relax and adventures! [...]. (South Tyrol IG 080520)

The common thread among the overall collocates of *will* (136) and forms employing the present continuous tense (40) is the overarching inten-

tion to demonstrate commitment to visitors regarding the actions and initiatives planned for the upcoming season. The audience is specifically addressed through the use of expressions such as *for you* and *to make your holiday*, while the level of commitment is emphasised by phrases such as *to be ready* and *to do our part*. These findings affirm the strategic choice of tourism organisations to refrain from solely sharing pandemic-related content on social media and instead convey a message of hope, redirecting attention towards the positive experiences that lie ahead, thus corroborating the statements of IDM interviewees.

Another noteworthy finding that emerged from the corpus-assisted analysis is the substantial use of the adversative marker *but* (78 occurrences). It has been previously acknowledged that *but* is frequently employed as a linguistic device to counterbalance the negative (Martin and White 2005). The examples observed in the corpus of social media posts provide further support to this theory, as the adversative marker is used to introduce a positive statement that counteracts a preceding negative one. In most cases identified, a *negative first-positive after* structure is observed. The use of the adversative marker serves a dual function. On one hand, it redirects attention towards the positive aspect of a situation (see examples 18 and 19), and on the other hand, it serves as a means of taking a stance (20 and 21).

- (18) [...] We may be far apart, *but* we are not alone. We're distant, *but* united. (Badia FB 090420)
- (19) Maybe something has changed, *but* we are always the same. South Tyrol is always the same. We can't wait to see you this summer ❤️ (South Tyrol FB 250520)
- (20) Life could seem dreary, dark and lonely. *But* at the same time, we all feel this touching solidarity, the massive support and the heart-warming helpfulness. (South Tyrol IG 130320)
- (21) Winter season is now over, *but* how many beautiful memories this winter has given us! 😊 (South Tyrol FB 160320)

In all four examples above, the first part of the sentence presents a widely shared idea, such as the perception of life being dreary or the winter season coming to an end. However, in the second part, the authors express their position in relation to the preceding statement. For instance, while acknowledging that winter is over, the writer highlights the beautiful memories it has provided. Similarly, though recognising that life may seem lonely due to everyone being at home, the author conveys a sense of solidarity and support. This trend further confirms the prevailing prefer-

ence among South Tyrolean tourism organisations to emphasise the positive aspects of the situation, particularly memories and positive emotions, with the aim of minimising the repercussions of the pandemic.

5. FINAL REMARKS

The present study has examined the linguistic strategies deployed by South Tyrolean tourism organisations to address visitors on social media platforms during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic adopting a combined methodological approach based on ethnographic interviews with practitioners of the tourism sector and corpus-assisted discourse analysis.

The preliminary results collected through the interviews highlighted some shared recommendations for writers, which can be summarised in the following points: (a) adopt a single voice, capable of reflecting a collective identity associated with South Tyrol; (b) prefer an emotional style of communication, based on the expression of affect rather than on the conventional appreciation of what South Tyrol has to offer; (c) minimise explicit references to the pandemic.

In light of Fuoli and Paradis' (2014) framework for the analysis of trust-repair discourse, the last suggestion (c) seems to clearly reflect the strategy of neutralising the negative, as it acts on discourses that could potentially undermine visitors' trust. Furthermore, the recommendation to ignore COVID-19 in social media communication seems in line with the general scepticism towards the pandemic and the widespread rejection of vaccines that characterised South Tyrol (GIMBE 2021). On the contrary, suggestions (a) and (b) seem to reflect the strategy of emphasising the positive, even though they involve a more nuanced viewpoint on the crisis, which emphasises the all-round expression of feelings, without necessarily excluding the negative ones from the messaging, such as, for instance, the sense of nostalgia for the past and the feeling of loneliness generated by the lack of visitors. These expressions of mixed affect were actually encouraged by communicators.

A significant finding of the present study is that the corpus-based analysis of social media posts largely confirmed the scenarios outlined in the interviews with practitioners. In particular, the prominent usage of the *we* pronoun as receiver-excluding in the messaging points to the aim of sounding as one, as suggested by point (a) of the interviews, strengthening community bonds and reinforcing a shared sense of belonging.

The we-pronoun seems to serve two distinct functions simultaneously: at the micro level, *we* assumes a reader-exclusive role, while at the macro level, *we* is representative of the local community, forming a cohesive unit that emphasises a collective identity.

Similarly, the aim of establishing an emotional relationship with visitors, corresponding to point (b) of the interviews, is efficiently harnessed by ego-targeting techniques based on the frequent usage of the you-pronoun, which shorten the distance between the communicator and the addressee and create an illusion of proximity (Maci 2007). Quoting from the dataset, this attitude seems to be reflected by the statement “*you* cannot be here, but it is as *you* are always with us” (Merano IG 170420). Lastly, the absence of COVID-related terminology from the wordlist of the most frequent lexical items in the corpus, confirms the remark of IDM’s informants regarding the preference for keeping COVID-19 related content to the minimum, as highlighted in point (c) of the interviews.

Findings also show a consistent use of the corrective *but* signalling an oppositive relation. The deployment of corrective coordination minimises the negative social and economic impacts of the pandemic and optimises the benefits for the local communities and the environment. Tourism organisations acknowledge the challenges posed by the pandemic and the associated crisis. However, they also convey a sense of resilience and determination by emphasising the actions and measures taken to address these challenges and their commitment to overcoming obstacles and finding opportunities for growth and improvement in the face of adversity. By highlighting the efforts made to mitigate the negative impacts and prioritise the well-being of the local communities and the environment, these organisations aim to instil confidence and trust among potential visitors and stakeholders. This linguistic phenomenon contributes to the overall communication efforts aimed at promoting the region as a desirable destination, even in the face of challenging circumstances.

Despite the restrictions and limitations imposed by the pandemic, the deployment of future-oriented linguistic strategies becomes crucial in conveying a sense of hope and possibility. By employing future-oriented statements, as observed in the present dataset, tourism communicators can paint a vivid picture of the future travel experience. They can highlight the anticipation of venturing beyond current boundaries and immersing oneself in new and exciting destinations. The use of such linguistic devices not only serves to inspire and motivate potential travel-

lers but also serves as a reminder that the challenging circumstances are temporary. Therefore, the importance of adopting a forward-looking perspective can be recognised. While acknowledging the difficulties triggered by the pandemic, it is essential to utilise linguistic tools to project a vision of the post-pandemic travel landscape. This approach allows to tap into the enduring human desire for exploration, ultimately paving the way for a revitalised and resilient tourism industry.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the strategies described above were employed to restore *normality*, a concept that forms a key part of scholars' response to the pandemic. Tourism is in fact a key mediator of normality, for example in considering the juxtaposition of "home" and "away" (Maci, Sala, and Vičič 2018). This is especially true during a crisis, where a return to normality is widely considered desirable. However, the search for *normality*, new or otherwise, in the form of a foreign place and/or time (Shim and Santos 2014), projects a certain gaze on the situation in view. A gaze that privileges *normality* frames the crisis as something other than the way people usually live; and similarly separate from the situations that are described as crises. Scholars maintain that tourism discourse rests on the notion of *otherness* realised in text through the deployment and intertwining of deictic forms of spatial referencing, e.g. here/now vs. somewhere else (Maci, Sala, and Vičič 2018). This observation becomes particularly relevant when considering the opposition between the COVID-19 crisis and the post-pandemic future. In the context of the first wave of the pandemic, it is possible to envision a future where travel and exploration regain their significance.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the linguistic strategies utilised by South Tyrolean tourism organisations, shedding light on the significance of employing future-oriented and corrective linguistic approaches to envision a post-crisis scenario. These findings not only enhance our understanding of tourism discourse in the context of communication crisis management but also have implications for the resilience of the tourism industry during challenging periods.

Further steps for future research could potentially move in the direction of exploring the concept of the *new normal*. How can a more sensitive and responsible approach be embraced in tourism discourse? This question calls for a critical examination of practices and a commitment to align with principles of sustainability and social responsibility (Eichelberger *et al.* 2021). Another key consideration for further inquiries lies in exploring the transformations of the tourism industry through the enactment of discursive transition strategies (Feola and Jaworska 2019).

Additionally, further investigation could focus on the role of *otherness* (Filimonova 2005) in shaping tourism discourse by examining the interplay of action verbs, emotional elements, active agents of change, and spatio-temporalities.

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Netlore, Memes and the Pandemic: Adjusting Virtually to the New Normal

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the assumption that “(t)he worldwide COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has monopolised news reports and public discussion in traditional media and on social media” (Dyrel 2020, 2), this paper explores the relevance memes have had in the COVID-19 emergency (Giordano and Marongiu 2021a; 2021b). Memes represent the vernacular discourse of *netizens*, or user-created derivatives produced by Internet users belonging to the *participatory culture* (Shifman 2014), otherwise deemed as *netlore* (Sánchez 2019), a kind of folklore comprising humorous texts and art. Internet memes, as a virus, have a high power of replication (Wiggings 2019). This work looks at how virtual platforms became the space for social participation on the pandemic debate. In particular, pro- and anti-vaccine memes were a way to cope with the stressful times throughout the period 2020-2021. A corpus of static online memes in English is investigated to ascertain how the treatment of the disease and the vaccine issue are framed figuratively, both verbally and visually, through the use of metaphors, similes, intertextuality, and other rhetorical features. Memes are considered as examples of *Netlore*, or digital contemporary folklore aimed at adapting to life in the new normal.

Keywords: COVID-19 crisis discourse; humour; intertextuality; memes; *Netlore*; rhetoric.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper completes the research started at the outburst of the COVID-19 emergency (Giordano and Marongiu 2021a; 2021b) and explores the relevance memes have had in the pandemic debate, during the several phases of the epidemic. As Dynel (2020, 2) has emphasised, the Coronavirus pandemic monopolised the news and the public debates in the traditional media as well as on the social media channels. In particular, this work analyses how the debate on the COVID-19 pandemic developed across time through the memes which appeared on the Web in the different Phases of the pandemic, and how this artefact of popular culture contributed to adapt to the drastic changes a new normality introduced. Memes represent the vernacular discourse of *netizens*, or user-created derivatives produced by Internet users belonging to the *participatory culture* (Shifman 2014), otherwise deemed as *netlore* (Sánchez 2019), a kind of folklore comprising humorous texts and art. In particular, the mismatch between the scriptural mode, what the words say, and the visual one, what the image shows, is the trigger of the humour characterising the memes object of this study. Additionally, humour is created by resorting to recognizable visual matrixes, famous characters, events or artefacts belonging to the contemporary culture. This element of intertextuality is essential in the construction of the net of meanings memes carry with them in their process of re-creation.

Internet memes have been compared to a virus, for their remarkable power of replication (Wiggings 2019). Furthermore, memes are a bottom-up production of popular culture which has shown the capacity of interfering with the top-down dynamics of power in a period of crisis. This becomes particularly clear in the political memes, which express concern or criticism for the position taken by eminent political figures with respect to the pandemic, or in favour or against protection measures from the virus. Similarly, when a vaccine became available, and an international debate in favour or against immunisation developed at all levels, the memes appearing on the social media and on the virtual platforms in general have shown to be a powerful discursive tool. Besides, by allowing social participation in the public debate, memes have been a way to cope with the stressful times throughout the period 2020-2021.

As mentioned, memes are considered as examples of *Netlore*, or digital contemporary folklore aimed at adapting to life in the new normal. With the analysis of these multimodal products, this work wants to contribute to the understanding of how the online grass-roots debate regarding the

Phases of the pandemic has developed through the memes. A corpus of static online memes in English is investigated here to ascertain how the treatment of the disease and the immunisation issue are framed figuratively, both verbally and visually, through the use of metaphors, similes, intertextuality, and other rhetorical features. The work is organised in the following way. The next section (section 2) provides a review of the existing literature on memes viewed as a *genre*, while section 3 introduces the data gathered to create the corpus studied, and the methodological approach used to analyse it. A separate section (section 4) is dedicated to introduce humour as a recurrent strategy in the popular culture productions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion on the memes selected from the ones available in the corpus and their analysis is in section 5. The final remarks are provided in the concluding section.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The word *meme* was first coined by Dawkins in his seminal work “The Selfish Gene” dated 1976. Following Dawkins, Shifman (2014) and Wiggins (2019) described the discursive power of memes in digital culture. Furthermore, Bruns (2008) and Burgess (2006) offered insight into the notions of vernacular creativity and *produsage* as mechanisms underlining the spread of memes. Additionally, Chagas, Freire, Rios and Magalhães (2019), Lolli (2020), Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2019) provided further knowledge on political memes and digital political communication. With reference to COVID-19 studies, Antosa and Demata (2021), Murru and Vicari (2021) focused on political discourse in memes during the pandemic. Aslan (2021), Cancelas-Ouviña (2021), Dynel (2020), Giordano and Marongiu (2021a; 2021b), Flecha Ortiz *et al.* (2020), Pulos (2020), and Semino (2021) looked at the use of linguistic resources such as multimodal voices, intertextuality, metaphors, and humour in institutional and mainstream culture as well as in popular culture. Digital and vernacular culture were also considered as a way to collectively cope with COVID-19.

2.1. *Netlore and the memescape*

Netlore is the term used to indicate the digital contemporary folklore (Cancelas-Ouviña 2021, 1), together with urban legends, hoaxes, man-

tras, jokes and chain letters. It is a term coined by Brunvand (1998) to refer to contemporary folklore transmitted over the Internet. Netlore uses today's digital media, including the mobile phone, to exist and perpetuate itself (Cancelas-Ouviña 2021, 3). Shifman (2014) defines memes as (post)modern folklore, while Wiggings and Bowers (2014) define them as the result of the intervention on the part of those who view, share, imitate, remix, reiterate and distribute them “as a response to their appearance on the *memescape*, a portmanteau of meme and landscape to imply the virtual, mental and physical realms that produce, reproduce, and consume Internet memes” (Wiggings and Bowers 2014, 1893). In particular, Wiggings and Bowers (2014) interpret memes from the perspective of Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, based on the idea that agency and structure are engaged in an interactive recursive relationship involving norms and practices.

2.2. *The Internet meme*

The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins introduced the word meme in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1989, 182; italics in original text). He affirmed that “[w]e need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*” (in Wiggins 2019, 1). “Meme” derives from the Greek *mimeme*, signifying “something which is imitated” (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, 56) and Dawkins shortened it to rhyme with ‘gene’ (Shifman 2014, 10). Therefore, its meaning is a small unit of culture that spreads from person to person by copying or imitation. Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl and Dobusch (2018, 2863) further defined them as “short bits of information that are easily reproduced and shared by large audiences”. While Wiggings (2019, 12) added that “[...] internet memes are digitally based but require human action/reaction and as such are a genre of communication in online social networks”.

This type of production is strictly anchored to specific group members. In this respect the notion of genre is linked to that of discourse community. Swales in the 1990s gave a definition of discourse community as “a broadly agreed set of common public goals” which “has mechanisms of communication among its members” (Swales, 1990, 33-58). He argues that a discourse community activates participatory mechanisms within a set of genres to promote information and communication of its aims among the community members, who possess a certain degree of exper-

character, their relevance in everyday life and in association to current affairs. All these aspects denote the democratisation in production and distribution of memes. Besides, Katz and Shifman (2017, 6) identified multimodality, culture remix, and phatic communities as the features which have the potential to boost the creation of nonsense in memes through the suspension of cognitive and referential meaning to the advantage of the *affective* meaning-making. This aspect will be relevant for our analysis and it will be taken into consideration in the following sections.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The initial data pool was the result of a wide-range search bound to the period 2020-2021 (Giordano and Marongiu 2021a; 2021b), as it intended to look at the COVID-19 lockdown and at the social reactions to it through memes. As the investigation went further, the data collection involved a more targeted search and purposeful sampling regarding the responses to the vaccine campaign and to the position of the political leaders through memes up to 2022.

We mainly used Google images as a search engine, and we collected about 200 memes for our main corpus. They are mainly static memes, or image macros, or text memetic units, made of re-usable images usually embedded in a frequently repeated background and accompanied with a text at the top and at the bottom. Examples of embedded images are the *advice animals* (Vickery 2014; Laineste and Voolaid 2017, 27), a type of image macro series representing animals or human beings used as ‘stock characters’ to represent a character trait or an archetype.

The ephemeral character of memes becomes clear when considering that some of the memes collected for the present investigation are no longer available on the Web, or they may have been remixed and used with different contents. Yet, they remain part of the corpus as the object of the research. Indeed, the focus of this study is on the net of meanings created by netizens around a meme or set of memes. For this purpose, to grasp the diachronical dimension of a meme, although sometimes difficult, can be revealing, as Laineste and Voolaid (2017) argue. They underline the importance of learning about the origin and history of a meme for a better understanding of its set of meanings (Laineste and Voolaid 2017, 27). Furthermore, this study takes into consideration Shif-

man's (2014) approach to the analysis of memes, which are not evaluated as isolated units, but rather as *semantic sets*, as she calls them, or as *webs of meanings* created and spread by human agents or organizations, as Chagas *et al.* (2019, 6) define them. Moreover, memes are also described as multi-layered, intertextual combinations of image and text produced and disseminated by Internet users.

In her study on how the Coronavirus pandemic was represented in memes in Spain, Cancelas-Ouviña (2021, 3) draws from previous research the list of features and strategies characterising memes production which is reported synthetically in *Table 1* below. Some of these aspects are considered particularly relevant for this work, specifically, humour and intertextuality, as Kobel and Lankshear (2007) argued already, and will be discussed in the following sections.

Table 1. – Taxonomy of stylistic features (Cancelas-Ouviña 2021, 3).

STYLISTIC FEATURES
Anonymous author
Brevity
Imitation
Humour
Ephemeral character vs longevity
Digitalisation
Immediacy
Variation, selection and retention
Current affairs and fashionable subjects
Everyday life
Relevance
Viral phenomenon and fast replication
Intertextuality
Juxtaposition of provocative and unconventional images
Democratisation in production and distribution
Multilateralism
Poor design

As mentioned, the type of memes taken into consideration in this investigation are the image macros, made of images and texts only, and the various modalities in which the components are subtly interwoven (Kress 2010; Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran 2016). The memes' multimodal content and the 'modes' of discourse-power relations they represent and embody in the COVID-19 era surface from their online history, and cultural and political context. Their analysis is manifestly of interdisciplinary nature, as it considers: discourse in its multimodal complexity; the meme as a *genre* by itself; and the outcoming discourse as the resulting product

of its context. Indeed, the memes selected are analysed with an issue-oriented approach, in line with the critical discourse analytic tradition, according to which “[u]nderstanding and explaining ‘power-relevant’ discourse structures involves reconstruction of the social and cognitive processes of their production” (van Dijk 1993, 12; Dynel 2020).

4. HUMOUR IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Humour² is among the aspects identified as paramount in the studies of memes. Indeed, the strategic function of humour to relieve psychological stress and to cope with distress in tragic circumstances is well-documented (Martin and Ford 2018). Previous research has also shown that online humour is used as a collective defence mechanism, to build solidarity in moments of crisis, by reframing the source of negative experiences to make it become the origin of positive emotions (Demjén 2016; Dynel and Poppi 2018; Dynel 2020).

Humour is triggered by the unexpected relationship between situations and characters generally belonging to the popular culture and to real life, which are referred to intertextually (Kristeva 1980). Irony and sarcasm presuppose a notional gap between surface vs intended meaning, the former being activated by the linguistic material, the latter by the associations of meaning triggered by the intertextual references, while sarcasm is obtained with the lexicalization of negative meanings through markedly positive wording.

Images are juxtaposed in intelligent, provocative, and often surprising ways. Nonsense, puns, and jokes are used to produce irony and sarcasm. Satire and parody are not only for laughter, but to evoke much deeper meanings. *Table 2* lists the elements contributing to spark humour which, according to Cancelas-Ouviña (2021, 5), make memes successful and creative. A number of these features appear in the memes here selected.

² The authors are aware that there is a whole research domain specifically dealing with humour (cf. Attardo and Ruskin 1991 for the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*; Davis 2008; Hempelmann 2008; Norrick, and Chiaro 2009 for humour in interaction; Dynel 2011). Nevertheless, this is not the area of interest of this paper.

Table 2. – Elements of humour (Cancelas-Ouviña 2021).

ELEMENTS OF HUMOUR
Unexpected relationships between situations and characters
Intertextuality
Inclusion of famous characters of the popular culture
Intelligent and provocative juxtaposition of images
Absurd hypotheses and rhetorical questions
Original metaphors and comparisons
Surprising facts
Play with double meanings of words, puns
Use of language games: homophony
Hyperboles
Anachronisms
Satire and parody
Nonsense and jokes
Irony and sarcasm

Humour has been a relatively recurring aspect of the COVID-19 debate on the memescape. Preliminary research has shown that humour stimulates the diffusion of content, contributes to creating a sense of community, guides interpretation of reality and helps to cope with it. Based on this, research on Internet memes related to COVID-19, such as Akram *et al.* (2021, 3), argues that humour helped individuals experiencing symptoms of anxiety to better cope with the pandemic. Significantly, anxious individuals form social and emotional bonds with others which may be perceived as socially supportive. Indeed, relief is a well-documented psychological function of humour, which can serve as a coping strategy, especially in tragic circumstances (see e.g. Martin and Ford 2018 and references therein). Humour is used as a collective defence mechanism for the sake of ‘mental hygiene’ (Dundes 1987), as well as solidarity building, which is evident in online humour referring to tragedies and crises (Dynel and Poppi 2020, 2). Humour is capable of reframing the source of negative experiences, such as suffering, anxiety and fear, as a source of positive emotions, bringing users psychological relief (cf. Kuiper *et al.* 1993).

In the *Internet meme*, defined as a remix, where the iterated message can be rapidly disseminated by members of participatory digital culture, humour, satire and parody together with other discursive strategies such as intertextuality, often represent only the surface. “In memetic communication, Internet users tend to draw on previously known cultural texts and make cross references to different popular cultural events, icons or phenomena. Memetic humour relies heavily on the combination of

familiar and well-known knowledge and preferences with current situations and experiences in unique, creative and surprising ways” (Aslan 2021, 51). As a matter of fact, the argument within the meme is usually, if not always, representative of an *ideological practice* (Wiggins 2019, 11). Social platforms have become virtual spaces in which to share experiences, feelings and symbolic values through the proliferation of memes, especially in times of crisis (Flecha Ortiz *et al.* 2020, 11). Memes generated for crisis situations materialise for many reasons. “They may be in response to the absurdity of the crisis, the seriousness of the crisis, the strange way a crisis response appears to citizens or for any other number of reasons. These memes would not exist without the crisis” (Pulos 2020, 3-4)

Crisis memes became a salient feature of public communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. They popularised some terminology delivered by government officials, companies, the media, scientists, doctors, and other important actors. They also contributed to the public discourse about the crisis in a participatory manner, sometimes seriously and sometimes through irony and humour.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the present section, a selection of memes among the about 200 gathered from the Internet, will be analysed based on the methodological criteria adopted. First, the memes built on intertextual references to popular culture and to facts and events affecting the contemporary society, as well as to the characters involved, will be taken into account in the discussion. The following subsection will focus on memes intend to discredit the famous people who endorsed the COVID-19 immunisation campaign, while another subsection will consider political memes, where the approach to the pandemic on the part of international political figures is questions hilarious or sarcastic ways.

5.1. *Intertextual references to popular culture and to contemporary society*

One of the most productive and long-lasting stock characters on the web at the time of the pandemic was Pepe the Frog, present in the memes in *Figure 1*. Pepe is a green anthropomorphic frog with a humanoid body. It first appeared in 2005 in a comic called *Boy’s Club* by the American artist

and cartoonist Matt Furie. It quickly became an Internet meme since it was shared everywhere on the web. In 2010 Pepe was adopted as a symbol of the alt-right movement, by the white supremacists and by hate groups in general. Even Donald Trump tweeted a Pepe presentation of himself associated with a video called “You can’t stump the Trump”. The original theme and positive ‘sentiment’ went through a constant alteration of text and images and conveyed a distinct negative and violent meaning for a couple of years (Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, and Dobusch 2018, 2864).



Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b



Fig. 1c

Chilling at home due to corona



Fig. 1d

Figure 1. – Memes with Pepe the Frog³.

In 2016 this character entered the hate symbol database thanks to the Anti-Defamation League. The author Matt Furie complained arguing that Pepe was not created to be a hate symbol, but it was only a joke rep-

³ Because of their very nature, Internet memes are not covered by copyright, or their use, when including copyrighted material, is allowed in some contexts, such as educational or non-profit applications, according to Fair Use Law.

representing positive or negative feelings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the original idea of Pepe was remixed to show the frog wearing a face mask or chilling at home because of coronavirus. In this occasion, the Internet community repackaged Pepe as a positive joke, representing the well-being of people even in hard times, as Furie had originally intended it. In the images provided here, the re-coding of a pre-existing theme can be noticed. These memes are examples of the ability that grassroots producers have to remix and repackage old elements to re-create and re-shape new meanings.

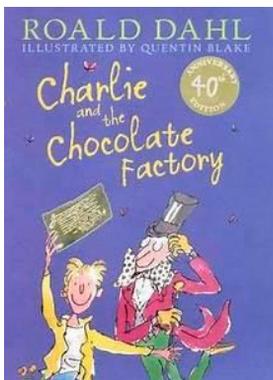


Fig. 2a



Fig. 2b



Fig. 2c

Figure 2. – *Condescending Wonka*.

Condescending Wonka is a popular meme based on the 1971 *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* film directed by Mel Stuart (Fig. 2b). Both refer to the children's novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* published in 1964 by Roald Dahl (Fig. 2a), where Willy Wonka is an impressive chocolate maker. The meme appeared in 2011 and was immediately used to convey sarcasm and a patronising attitude. Wonka is condescending, superior and full of himself, conveying sarcasm and irony. The meme shows a still of actor Gene Wilder performing Willy Wonka in the film. The picture generally comes together with a short caption, linked to the context in which the meme is used. In the meme under scrutiny (Fig. 2c), the character addresses the audience asking whether sharing memes can help them to deal with their Corona anxiety. The rhetorical question placed is sarcastic and condescending. According to this meme, producing and sharing memes during the pandemic is useless. In fact, it is considered paternalistic and contemptuous by Willy Wonka. As a matter

of fact, sharing contents represents in this case a poor attempt of collective coping with the crisis and a weak and inadequate struggle against the psychological drain related to it. As aptly claimed by Giordano and Marongiu (2021a, 215-216) referring to Willy Wonka artefacts: “The intertextual relations operate not only through mimicry and remix of two elements of literary and popular culture (such as the 1964 novel and the 1971 movie) but also through the sarcasm and irony used to deal with an unpleasant and unfortunate global situation”.

*“Water, water everywhere,
 And all the boards did shrink,
 Water, water everywhere,
 Nor any drop to drink”*

The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner
 S.T. Coleridge (1798)



Figure 3. – Meme with the phrasal template ‘x, x everywhere’.

The phrasal template *x, x everywhere* refers to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the longest major poem by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, written in 1797-98 and published in 1798 in the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. It views an old seaman uttering those lines when he is surrounded by salty water that he cannot drink. By extension, these verses refer to a situation in which someone is amid plenty and wealth, but they cannot benefit from it (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, 67-68). The phrasal template was first used in 2007 when one of the administrators of the platform 4chan developed a filter to add a vulgar phrase to porno images shared and posted by users on its notice board. Later, users started to change the swear word with more appropriate terms, more relevant to the images and contexts they were posting, thus giving a new life to this expression. In 2010 the sentence was associated to the scene taken from a dialogue between the two characters Buzz and Woody in the Disney film *Toy Story 2* (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, 67-68). According to Mazzoleni, every time this scene appears, Internet users immediately expect to find an association with the phrasal template *x, x everywhere*. This is exactly what happened with the meme where the two characters, wearing face masks and looking surprised, are startled by the unfortunate, unpropitious, and challenging times we had to experience and the comment underneath is “Coronavirus, Coronavirus everywhere”.

The memes in *Fig. 4* and *Fig. 5* take after the film *The Shining*, a 1980 psychological horror film produced and directed by Stanley Kubrick. The film in *Fig. 4b* is, in turn, based on Stephen King's 1977 novel, in *Fig. 4a*, and stars Jack Nicholson. The meme in *Fig. 4c* shows a still in which the possessed husband and father Jack Torrance is driving his family to an isolated hotel where he will try to kill them. This meme can be interpreted as dramatic irony or even black humour with the characters in the scene being happy, blissful, and unaware of what is going to happen. Ironically, the meme is saying that it is obvious that staying home with one's family for weeks or months is bound to cause interpersonal and family problems. Through the intertextual reference to the film and, in turn, the book, the meme producers are hyperbolically and ironically commenting on the fact that tempers and moods can become violent and tense when family members have to spend too much time together because of the restrictions due to the pandemic.

Kristeva (1980, 37) states that any text is a mosaic of quotations and the absorption and transformation of another. Accordingly, the meme refers intertextually to previous cultural products which belong to the shared world knowledge of the Internet community.



Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b



Fig. 4c

Figure 4. – Memes referring to “*The Shining*”.

The meme “Here’s COVID-19” hints back to the quote *Here’s Johnny* from *The Tonight Show* starring Johnny Carson, which was broadcast from 1962 to 1992, in *Fig. 5a*. At the beginning of each episode, Ed McMahon introduced Carson with the line, “and now, *heeeeeere’s Johnny!*”. The line was used in the famous scene of the film in which Jack Torrance breaks through a door wielding a hatchet with a deformed face

because of the delirium of madness, as in *Fig. 5b* (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, 82). That scene was parodied online in various video remixes and image macros and was reproduced in several cultural products. The meme *Here's COVID-19!* shown in *Fig. 5c* recalls the original scene displaying Jack's face through the door and the caption recalls his words with the same intonation echoing the original sound pattern.



Fig. 5a



Fig. 5b



Fig. 5c

Figure 5. – “Here’s Johnny!” meme.

The memes in *Figures 6a, 6b, 6c, 6d, 6e,* and *6f* represent the Philosophical Raptor (Wiggins and Bowers 2014), featuring an image of a velociraptor, a philosopher dinosaur, holding its fangs close to the chin, gazing into the distance, and with the appearance of a philosophical thinker. The first *philosoraptor* meme appeared in 2012. The original artwork, created by Sam Smith in 2008, was used in a popular meme mimicking apparently dumb questions individuals can ask on the Internet, that can be valid questions which are yet to be answered. *Philosoraptor* officially became an *advice dog*⁴ meme variant on the site *Encyclopedia Dramatica* in November 2009.

The basic meme commonly used is an image macro with a picture of the philosoraptor’s head, with one talon under its chin, asking the deepest questions of the universe. The caption is usually divided into two parts, half of it appears at the top of the picture, and the other half at the

⁴ “Advice Dog is an image macro series that features a picture of the head of a smiling puppy on a color wheel background split into six separate colors. Usual derivatives are often accompanied by two lines of text written in a guidance or advising format with the advice given usually being extremely poor, unethical, or deplorable. Since its debut, the series has spawned dozens of spin-offs referred to as Advice Animals. In these variations, memers replace the dog’s head with a different animal’s or a human’s head, adding advice that is reflective of the character’s archetype personality and using the same two-line image macro formula” (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/advice-dog>).

bottom. In the memes under scrutiny here, the philoraptor is ruminating over issues linked to Corona virus with absurd questions, using sarcasm and black humour. Generally, the train of thought is paradoxical and controversial, finding fertile ground in the crisis caused by COVID-19.



Fig. 6a



Fig. 6b



Fig. 6c



Fig. 6d



Fig. 6e

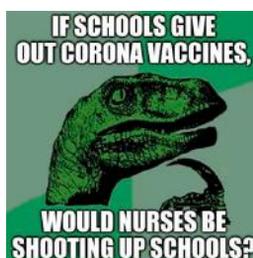


Fig. 6f

Figure 6. – Philoraptor memes: “asking questions and questioning something”.

The memes in Fig. 7 show a variety of perspectives about sport practicing in COVID-19 debate, they explicitly use recognisable voices, including intertextual references to popular culture and to contemporary society (Dynel 2020, 3). They point to the fact that practising sports and leisure activities in some countries was not allowed⁵ during the pandemic. The meme in Fig. 7a shows people training inside a balloon for them to keep social distance as recommended. This refers to the stricter restrictions China adopted since the beginning of the Coronavirus outbreak. The memes in Fig. 7b and in Fig. 7c are examples of black humour. The one in the middle presents fencing as the perfect COVID-19 sport because it involves using masks, gloves and, “if anybody gets closer than 6 ft., you

⁵ Actually, in some countries sport and leisure activities, when carried out in isolation by individuals, were the only outdoor activities to be allowed, if minimally.

are allowed to stab them”. The meme in *Fig. 7c* shows the terrifying and evil clown from the movie *IT*, inspired by Stephen King’s horror novel who is trying to attract the little boy Georgie into the sewer down the gutter promising he can play sports there. The three memes are appealing to, and playing with, the nostalgic feelings of the viewers who miss doing sports and would adapt to any new and strange situation to overcome the restrictions imposed during the Coronavirus outbreak. The juxtaposition of images and captions triggers irony.



Fig. 7a



Fig. 7b



Fig. 7c

Figure 7. – Sports and leisure activities memes.



Fig. 8a



Fig. 8b

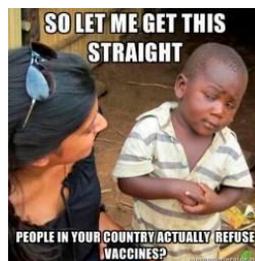


Fig. 8c

Figure 8. – Memes for and against vaccines.

The memes in *Figure 8* speak to different discourse communities. The ones in *Fig. 8a* and in *Fig. 8b* address in particular the antivaxxers; their multimodal message develops from the conflict between the shocking picture of people who became monsters after ‘the shot’ and the text, where these people claim they feel great. This is a humorous way of presenting the relatively negative effect which were said to be associated with the shots (high fever, headache, pain in your limbs, etc.), and were a concern also for those in favour of vaccine. In fact, the memes can be fully appreciated also by pro-vaxxers, rather than rejected as being wrong, harmful or silly. The meme in *Fig. 8c* is likely to primarily appeal to those

in favour of vaccines; it shows a child from a developing country, possibly in Africa, shows concern and doubt in trying to understand why people in the white woman’s country “refuse vaccines”, a privilege that his family may not afford. The interplay between the text and the picture, especially his facial expression and the way he holds his hands, conveys a connotation which triggers irony if not sarcasm.

Memes are also conducive of complex meaning-making in the light of the relevant socio-political and cultural context in which they are created (Dynel 2020 8; Dynel and Poppi 2020). If we look at them as crisis memes, as Pulos (2020, 22) does, they “are unique communicative artifacts at play in the public discourse during the cycle of a crisis. They are loaded with meaning-making potential that is tied to the social and cultural implications that surface during the crisis”.

5.2. Discrediting testimonials



Figure 9. – Memes on testimonials of the vaccine campaigns.

The memes in Fig. 9 discredit testimonials who are in favour of vaccines or who sponsored the governmental restrictions. Antivaxxers campaigns considered paranoid the pressure and the coercion exercised by the new governments’ policies and believed people such as Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos

only profited from the Coronavirus paranoia and the adopted measures, becoming even richer. As a matter of fact, despite their worldly recognised wealth, technological knowledge, and managerial skills, these two entrepreneurs are ironically and humorously accused of being unable to contribute positively to the vaccine campaign and to find successful solutions to the global crisis due to the pandemic. Specifically, based on a speech Bill Gates pronounced in 2015 where he argued that an infectious virus was “the greatest risk to humanity”, conspiracy theorists and right-wing experts claimed that he had planned “to use a pandemic to wrest control of the global health system” (Wakabayashi Alba and Tracy 2020, in Pulos 2020, 19). In particular, the image of Bill Gates in *Fig. 9c* has been remixed and reused with different text to support the conspiracy theories arguing against the immunisation campaigns which found expression on the Web.

5.3. Political memes



Fig. 10a



Fig. 10b



Fig. 10c



Fig. 10d



Fig. 10e

Figure 10. – Political memes.

The memes in *Fig. 10* manipulate the narratives of the pandemic adopted by the British and American politicians and media. The first three memes (*Figs. 10a, 10b, and 10c*) present former British PM Boris Johnson as a negative role model in terms of COVID-19 prevention, criticising his approach to the virus. The resulting tone is ironic, when not sarcastic. The memes use the same “militarised language” used by the Prime Minister, when he adopted “the dichotomic construction of healthy *vs* unhealthy citizens during the pandemic” as Antosa and Demata (2021, 16) point out. In the meme in *Fig. 10c*, the elderly are the enemies to fight against since they were especially affected by the virus. In *Fig. 10d* and *Fig. 10e*, the memes draw a parallelism between Boris Johnson and the former US President Donald Trump. Specifically, they are criticised for sharing the same careless approach to the pandemic. Besides, the two politicians are ridiculed for their similar messy haircut in the meme in *Fig. 10e*, establishing a humorous link between Johnson’s and Trump’s haircut and those of some bird. This seems to postulate that the haircut was a consequence of the transmission of COVID-19 from animals to humans.

Some memes satirise political figureheads. Former US president Donald Trump, who referred to himself as a *meme president*, has been portrayed in memes as Pepe the Frog and Lord Farquaad from *Shrek*, as in *Fig. 11a*. The meme in *Fig. 11b* shows Trump hospitalised for COVID-19 and treated with Clorex, a humorous reference to his outrageous suggestion, made on April 23, 2020, to researchers to consider injecting disinfectant in COVID-19 patients (Pulos 2020, 4-5). The meme in *Fig. 11c* ridicules Trump “Working on a cure for the Coronavirus” while playing with a children’s educational game. These memes play on the Former President’s mistrust of experts, on his failure to consider the virus seriously from the beginning, defining it as a hoax, and here portrayed as someone who relies on a chimerical miracle-based reading of the end of the pandemic rather than one soundly based on science, such as in *Fig. 11d* and *Fig. 11e*. His bizarre statement, on the one hand, urged a popular brand of disinfectant and the US Environmental Protection Agency to warn people not to ever ingest disinfectant products, and, on the other hand, triggered the production of memes such as the ones we can see here. In the meme in *Fig. 11f*, on the contrary, former president Donald Trump is shown wearing a gas mask and a protective uniform revealing his complete distrust in science as well as and his fear of the virus and his worry despite what he states.



Fig. 11a



Fig. 11b



Fig. 11c



Fig. 11d

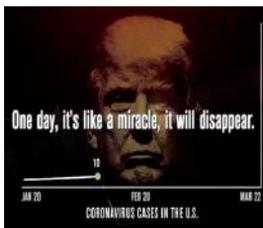


Fig. 11e



Fig. 11f

Figure 11. – Memes discrediting politicians.

It may be worth mentioning that, as Murru and Vicari (2021, 2438) argued, “[t]he generic criticism expressed by memes that were ‘making a point’ recalls populism as a common and minimal set of ideas relying on a few *topoi*, like anti-elitism and anti-scientism, a fierce opposition of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and an emotionally charged appeal to a communal belonging where any outlying voice is harshly blamed”. This populist approach has allowed the allegiance of opposite extreme ideologies.

Similarly, this political attitude of mistrust towards medical experts shown by the former US President is ridiculed in these memes. According to these memes, experts are unnecessarily worrying and imposing restrictions on the citizens. In the meme in *Fig. 12a*, Donald Trump is questioning authoritativeness since he is rather inclined to follow his

irrational attitudes rather than the opinion of an undisputed scientific authority such as Anthony S. Fauci.

In the meme in *Fig. 12b* the text refers to Fauci’s attack on Trump, yet he is depicted while wearing Scumbag Steve’s hat. Blake Boston, commonly known as Scumbag Steve, is the subject of an Internet meme that became known in 2011. It originated in 2006 with a picture taken by Boston’s mother, Susan, of Blake Boston of Millis, Massachusetts, when he was 16, wearing a cap backwards and a winter coat. Boston’s face went viral paired with some captions, becoming an advice animal and a stock character. Generally, the meme has some text on top of Boston’s image consisting of an introductory sentence and a punchline at the bottom, as in *Fig. 12c*.

In the meme in *Fig. 12b* the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases for 35 years, Anthony S. Fauci, blames Trump for unpreparedness, but the fact that he is wearing Scumbag Steve’s hat is rather humorous and discredits the scientist and his authoritative opinions. According to anti-vaxxers, Fauci’s life-long experience and competence boils down to ridiculing Trump’s unpreparedness (i.e. at a purely discorsal level) rather than showing his own ‘preparedness’ in defeating the virus (i.e. at a transactional and operative level).



Fig. 12a



Fig. 12b



Fig. 12c

Figure 12. – Memes discrediting the experts.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In a nutshell, this study has shown that the three main characteristics or features of memes are humour, intertextuality with reference to popular culture, and multimodality, which juxtaposes words and images, along with two other elements, which are communicability and malleability. These characteristics, all together, guarantee dissemination across time

event instrumental to coping with the crisis, creating and boosting solidarity as well as antagonistic and conflictual social, cultural, and political standing points.

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Get a Jab or Grab a Glass (of Wine)

A Sentiment and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis of Reader Comments on News Story in the *Daily Mail*

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ABSTRACT

The first lockdown had a positive impact on alcohol consumption, with wine becoming the most commonly consumed alcoholic beverage. Although the belief that the immune system and viral resistance are boosted by alcohol was labelled as ‘myth’ by the World Health Organization, a later study gave evidence that red wine drinking provided protection from COVID-19¹. Based on these premises, this paper embraces a multi-disciplinary approach combining Sentiment and corpus-assisted discourse analysis to explore news readers’ reactions to the news story as divulged by the *Daily Mail* in a corpus of 454 online comments. Findings indicate that sarcasm and distrust are the most frequent feelings, along with a mainly negative sentiment associated with discourses concerning politics, the effectiveness of various substances in combating the virus and wine-making traditions. Also, insights into the role of readers’ role in affecting editorial policies are drawn.

Keywords: corpus-assisted discourse analysis; COVID-19; reader comments; sentiment analysis; wine.

¹ We are aware that from the medical perspective, this evidence is controversial. See, for instance the papers found at the PubMed repository (for instance Fan *et al.* 2021; Huang *et al.* 2022).

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has been a major player during the recent pandemic, with people connecting both to spread the information they had and to keep up-to-date. Despite its informative and ‘humane’ potential, however, user-generated content (henceforth UGC) might be the origin of unverified information or any fake news which could rapidly spread worldwide and cause significant damage if not handled properly. At the Munich Security Conference on February 15, 2020, World Health Organization (henceforth WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (quoted in Zarocostas 2020, 676) warned the world about a by-product of the epidemic to be fought, namely the infodemic. The term was coined by David Rothkopf in a 2003 Washington Post column where he defined it as “a few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumour, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies” (Rothkopf 2003, online) emerged in response to minor and major crises like SARS and terrorism. At the beginning of March 2020, WHO Director-General spoke again to warn the world against “not just a public health crisis, [but] a crisis that [would] touch every sector” (quoted in Ducharme 2021, online) and, of course, the wine industry was not exempt from the commercial and social-media related consequences of the pandemic. It might come as no surprise that in many countries restrictions on mobility had a positive impact on alcohol consumption with wine in particular becoming “the most frequently consumed alcoholic beverage” (Dubois *et al.* 2021, 165) of all. Amongst the reasons for the increase in alcohol and specifically wine consumption at times of crisis are: its categorisation as *comfort food* (Cavallo, Sacchi, and Carfora 2020); the generalised panic-buying of food and drink, commonly referred to as a “survivalist response” (Velikova *et al.* 2021, 3); reasons associated with stress: “to distract from problems”, “to help me sleep” and “to relax” (Velikova *et al.* 2021, 12); and the belief that alcohol could prevent COVID-19 infection. This and other news about wine and alcohol in general and its role in contributing to COVID-19 prevention spread widely and caused no little harm. Indeed, an Iranian health ministry spokesman stated that 5,011 people were poisoned with methanol alcohol, of which 90 people suffered eye damage or lost their sight and 728 died between February 20 and April 7, 2020 (Aljazeera 2020). Following the tragedy and other attempts to spread news promoting the idea that alcohol stimulates immunity and resistance to the virus, the WHO went on record to categorically deny it. The International body issued a 6-page

document entitled “Alcohol and COVID-19: What You Need to Know” to address “the misinformation that [was] being spread through social media and other communication channels about alcohol and COVID-19” (World Health Organization 2020, 1). In the document, the statement “alcohol (beer, wine, distilled spirits or herbal alcohol) stimulates immunity and resistance to the virus” was labelled as myth and, in strong opposition to this, the statement “alcohol has a deleterious effect on your immune system and will not stimulate immunity and virus resistance” was labelled as fact (World Health Organization 2020, 2). As COVID-19 cases continued to decline, however, on January 3, 2022 a study by Dai *et al.* (2022) conducted on 473,957 British subjects, 16,559 of whom tested positive for COVID-19 published by *Frontiers in Nutrition*² and entitled “COVID-19 Risk Appears to Vary across Different Alcoholic Beverages” provided evidence that “consumption of red wine above or double above the guidelines played protective effects against the COVID-19” (Dai *et al.* 2022, online). The authors found that “compared with non-drinkers, the COVID-19 risk was 10-17% lower in red wine consumers [and] 7-8% lower in white wine and champagne consumers [while] consumers of beer and cider had 7-28% higher risks of COVID-19”. The story was covered by newspapers all over the world (at least 49, see section 3.1), which spread the news that alcohol could prevent the virus.

Based on these premises, the proposed paper aims at exploring news websites users’ reactions to the abovementioned news story by embracing a multi-disciplinary approach combining sentiment (Kim and Hovy 2004) and corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Partington 2013) in a discourse-historical perspective (Wodak and Meyer 2001). Specifically, a unique dataset of 454 user-generated online comments posted in response to the article titled “Red Wine Wards off Coronavirus... but Beer Does not, According to New Research”, published online on January 23, 2022 by the *Daily Mail*, was scrutinised through automated natural language processing (NLP) tools, namely VADER (Hutto and Gilbert 2014) and #Lancsbox 6.0 (Brezina, Weill-Tessier, and McEnery 2021) for the identification of frequent words and the sentiment score. Subsequently, the analysis delved deeply into the discourses triggered by the news story spreading a scientific article that apparently indicates different results from what declared by WHO official documents in order to learn about the commenters’ underlying drives and further the sentiment analysis from a discursive standpoint. It is believed that by understanding

² Impact Factor: 5.0.

how individuals respond to news is crucial in the development of effective strategies to empower both editors and the public and to make more informed decisions in both the publishing and the reading process.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section provides an overview of user-generated content (UGC), sentiment analysis and corpus-assisted discourse analysis for the subsequent analysis. The expression UGC is widely used to denote all resources “in the form of text, audio, video, image, or metadata, that are posted by users either intentionally or impulsively on social networking sites” (Kurian 2015, 905) as feedbacks, blog entries, comments etc. This study considers a definite type of UGC that is the online reader comment. Herring (2013, 5) defines the reader comment on news stories as a less prototypical type of convergent media computer-mediated communication “because it involves the convergence of text with text rather than the convergence of text with another mode” and gives rise to polylogues (Marruccia 2004), dialogues developing on multiple levels in that commenters can engage in conversations with one another other than responding to the text. A comments section to online news is relatively straightforward (Napolitano 2018) and “provides a unique and constructive space for public discourse” (Manosevitch and Walker 2009, 2).

Over the past few years, UGC has amassed “a large amount of data on individual attitudes, behaviours, and experiences” (Ruelens 2022, 731), and yet “its practical use in addressing relevant research questions and the knowledge of analytical techniques to examine such data among social science researchers remain limited” (Ruelens 2022, 732). One of the possible usages of these data is sentiment analysis where the word sentiment refers to “an explicit or implicit expression in [a] text of the Holder’s positive, negative, or neutral regard toward the Claim about the Topic” (Kim and Hovy 2004, 1; capital letters in the original). Sentiments convey the polarity, which “signifies the orientation of the sentiment expressed in the discourse” (Corbett and Savarimuthu 2022, 5), of the six primary emotions – anger, fear, sadness, joy, love, and surprise. Thus, sentiment analysis – as one of the major approaches of social media analysis (SMA) and web contents mining (WCM) – refers to “the general method to extract subjectivity and polarity from text” (Taboada *et al.* 2011, 268). The sentiment in a text can be rated as negative, neutral

or positive and might be assigned a score determining the degree of negativity or positivity. Balahur *et al.* (2013) provided insights into sentiment classification for news. They pinpointed three different ‘views’ on news articles, namely author, reader, and text, all of which have to be addressed within a study. From a reader’s perspective, sentiment analysis can be defined as the assessment of a ‘target’ based on people’s ‘norm’ that is “their personal understanding and approval of what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in a certain situation” (Balahur *et al.* 2013, 2218). From the author’s viewpoint, identifying news bias or perspective should concern discovering how the ways in which a story is framed can express a certain sentiment. From the point of view of the text, at last, the focus is on what is expressly said or explicitly mentioned. In this study, the author’s point of view and the text’s point of view are considered for examining the reader’s point of view in relation to them and the source of the text.

A combination of traditional corpus linguistics techniques – keyword analysis in particular – and discourse analysis is then used. The corpus is studied from a discourse-historical point of view, taking into account the “available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive ‘events’ are embedded” (Wodak and Meyer 2001, 65) for the identification of triggered discourse topics. Indeed, KhosraviNik and Sarkoah (2017, 3622) posit that the “identification and classification of specific topics of a discourse are among the first and most important aspects of CDS³”. The analysis allows for an observation of how specific discourse topics in the original article spark fresh discourses or develop already-existing ones. In this respect, Wodak and Meyer’s discussion of the relationships between distinct discourse topics is particularly relevant to this study:

[a] ‘discourse’ about a specific topic can find its starting point within one field of action and proceed through another one. Discourses and discourse topics ‘spread’ to different fields and discourses. They cross between fields, overlap, refer to each other or are in some other way socio-functionally linked with each other. (Wodak and Meyer 2001, 67)

If it comes as no surprise that this is the first study that assesses public attitudes towards wine’s health-related potential in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, to the best of my knowledge, this is not the first attempt to observe user-generated content as applied to the wine industry towards wine as a product in general⁴.

³ Critical Discourse Studies.

⁴ See: Cuomo *et al.* 2016; Wouters 2016; Cassar, Caruana, and Konietzny 2020.

3. DATA AND METHOD

The aim of this section is to describe the corpus building process and the method of analysis. Since replicability is considered paramount in accurate research, the author is committed to making this study's procedures as transparent and replicable as possible.

3.1. *Corpus building*

In a preliminary phase, the author considered the idea of using more sources for collecting online reader comments. This phase entailed the search of news articles mentioning the study “COVID-19 Risk Appears to Vary across Different Alcoholic Beverages” by Dai *et al.* (2022) in media outlets including an interactive commenting feature with at least 100 comments, via a Google search with the terms ‘covid’ and ‘wine’ covering the time-span January 2022-present. This led to the creation of an initial corpus of 49 articles from worldwide online sources of which, however, only one having more than 100 comments and therefore prompting the author to opt for a single-source study. Specifically, a unique dataset of 454 user-generated online comments posted in response to the article titled “Red Wine Wards off Coronavirus... but Beer Does not, According to New Research”, published online on January 23, 2022 by the *Daily Mail*, met the corpus criteria. The decision to discard other articles hinges upon the fact that UGC is heavily dependent on the content they react to. Although the study they refer to is the same, the way the piece of news is framed affects users’ interpretation and reaction; as Chong and Druckman (2007, 104) claim: “changes in the presentation of an issue or an event produce (sometimes larger) changes of opinion”.

3.2. *Corpus tools*

A relatively large body of research of online UGC has employed manual analysis as a primary method, which somewhat represents a limit to the analysis of larger corpora of comments. In this study, automated natural language processing (NLP) tools were relied on to facilitate the type of analysis the author aimed to perform. Specifically, sentiment, frequency, and keyword analysis were the text mining methods considered; the soft-

were chosen to carry out these tasks were VADER and #Lancsbox 6.0, respectively.

VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary for sEntiment Reasoning) is a lexicon and rule-based sentiment analysis tool which relies on a gold-standard quality lexicon based on trustworthy sentiment word-banks with the addition of “numerous lexical features common to sentiment expression in microblogs, including a full list of Western-style emoticons” (Hutto and Gilbert 2014, 220). The strength of VADER as compared to a typical bag-of-words model⁵ is the incorporation of other features concerning word-order sensitive relationships, namely: punctuation, capitalisation, and degree modifiers as elements affecting the intensity of a text; and the role of the contrastive conjunction ‘but’, a negation in the tri-gram preceding a sentiment-laden lexical feature in flipping the polarity of a text (Hutto and Gilbert 2014, 221). Following the acquisition of valid point estimates of sentiment valence, the analysis of a sample of 400 most positive and most negative tweets from Twitter selected from 10K random tweets makes it “especially attuned to microblog-like contexts [and] performs exceptionally well in the social media domain” (Hutto and Gilbert 2014, 216). Not only does VADER distinguish between negative, neutral, and positive sentiment but also generates a score expressing how negative or positive the sentiment is.

#LancsBox 6.0 is a new generation corpus tool for the processing and analysis of corpus data including 6 modules performing an individual task. The present analysis exploited the Words tool – which generates frequency lists of types, lemmas and POS categories – and the KWIC tool – which produces a list of all instances of a specific term within a corpus and allows for the analysis of concordances.

3.3. *Method*

The approach to examining online readers’ comments is partly based on Ruelens (2022); the procedure, however, is adapted to embrace a discursive perspective. The author reported the results of a survey of 634 online comments to find out about the attitudes towards healthcare services in different countries, the frequency of topics, nationality and

⁵ In a bag-of-words model “a document is represented as a binary or frequency-based feature vector of the tokens it contains, regardless of their position in the text” (Paltoglou and Thelwall 2013, 246).

gender of respondents. The original analytical strategy included the following six steps: extraction; data cleaning; extraction of the names of the countries; determination of gender; word frequency analysis; sentiment analysis. Here, instead, sentiment analysis is preceded by the reading of a 10% sample of the total corpus and the article for qualitative generalisations; frequency analysis is followed by a manual analysis in which the comments by the users are explored qualitatively. The analytical strategy therefore appears as follows:

- Methodological steps (see section 3.4):
 - Extraction (news article and comments).
 - Data cleaning (comments).
- Corpus analytical steps:
 - Sample analysis (news article and comments): this step concerned the reading of the article and a sample of 46 comments (10% of the corpus of comments) selected randomly. A qualitative preliminary analysis at this point was considered paramount for the subsequent quantitative and qualitative analysis. Indeed, in the case at issue, the reading of the article – to be regarded as part of the corpus – helped figure out the main discourses brought up by the writer and reading through a sample of the comments helped pinpoint the further discourses users might bring up in their responses. Also, in the context of a sentiment analysis, the practitioner can get a rough idea of the general sentiment of the responses and put into action methodological adjustments if required.
 - Sentiment analysis (comments): VADER was implemented in Python 3.0 to determine the emotional polarity of individual comments.
 - Frequency and keyword analysis (comments): the corpus was uploaded to #Lancsbox 6.0 and a frequency list was generated thanks to the Words tool. Stopwords⁶ were omitted to decrease the noise of language in the text and have lexical words stand out in the corpus.
 - Discourse analysis (news article and comments).

⁶ Stopwords can be defined as common words in a text that do not provide substance to the specific subject of interest. Examples of stopwords are “and”, “is”, “of”, and “the”. The stopwords list considered is freely accessible at: <https://countwordsfree.com/stopwords>.

3.4. Methodological steps

In the first step – namely the extraction phase – comments were collected from the newspaper’s website and reported in a .txt file. Duplicates were not removed as it was believed this would disregard a potential conscious double-submission of the same comment. The extraction phase led to the creation of the *Wine and the Pandemic User Generated Content 22* (henceforth WPUGC22) corpus of 454 comments totalling 7,721 tokens and 1,845 types 1,776 lemmas and an average length of 17 words per comment.

In the second step, the corpus of comments underwent a pre-processing cleaning that entailed the removal of special symbols (-, ‘, ’, “, and ”) and the correction of typos and grammatical errors that could prevent the software from working properly. When posting on the web, people tend to use informal language and do not have to adhere to any formal and content restrictions. This means there are a lot of spelling mistakes, abbreviations, and slang words, as well as errors in syntax. Since NLP tools work best on structured text, the more unstructured text in this medium can make it difficult for them to work with and result in failure. For this reason, removing the *noise* in a text prevents any distortion of reliability of the results.

3.5. Research ethics

Online research ethics and consent are still developing, as are the applicable ethical standards. Although commenters did not explicitly accept to participate in this research, comments were obtained from an open access news website where everyone can read them without subscription. It is therefore thought to be acceptable to make use of these data for research without receiving specific approval. At the same time, additional private information like the photo, place of origin, pseudonym, and other identifying information was left out of illustrative examples (Page *et al.* 2022, 75).

4. ANALYSIS

This section presents the results of the corpus analytical steps performed on the article and the comments.

4.1. *Sample analysis*

Apart from the discourse of COVID-19 – as a sub-discourse of health with the occurrences of ‘covid’, ‘virus’, ‘flu’, and ‘respiratory tract-related infection’ –, the article also falls within the discourse of wine – in particular, red one – and alcoholic beverages in general – ‘beer’ and ‘cider’ –, and slightly touches on chemistry – ‘polyphenol content’ (Fig. 1).

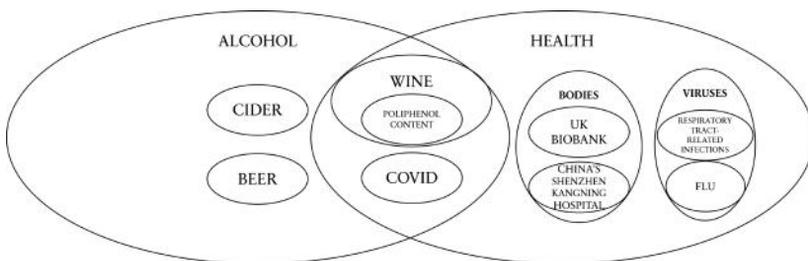


Figure 1. – *Discourse topics in the news article.*

The sample of comments, then, gave useful clues about the discourses triggered by the article. References to COVID-19 and the wine industry were detected as expected, in addition, some mentions of Boris Johnson and France are spotted. The keywords identified were noted down to form the basis of the subsequent frequency and discourse analysis. More importantly, the reading of the sample warned the author about the presence of sarcasm and irony and urged an impromptu adjustment of the initial analytical strategy with the inclusion of a sarcasm inspection. Alba-Juez and Attardo (2014, 100) give a definition of sarcasm as negative irony “where an apparently positive comment expresses a negative criticism or judgment of a person, a thing or a situation”. This inconsistency between the surface sentiment and the hidden one provides sentiment analysis practitioners with an intricate challenge (Bouazizi and Ohtsuki 2016). For this reason, the analytical strategy was slightly adjusted to suit the new needs. Specifically, the step devoted to the sentiment analysis was widened to include a sarcasm inspection to get finer-grained results regarding the sentiment of the comments.

4.2. Sentiment analysis

Table 1 below reports the number of comments labelled per polarity, their percentage in relation to the total number of comments and their average intensity.

Table 1. – Sentiment analysis.

SEMANTIC ORIENTATION	AVERAGE INTENSITY	AMOUNT	PERCENTAGE
Negative	0.4519	110	24.23%
Neutral	0.0	144	31.72%
Positive	0.4925	200	44.05%

A quick look at the sentiment categorisation and intensity assigned by VADER confirms the presence of a nuanced set of reactions, from mild irony to open humour and bitter sarcasm, especially when politicians are involved. In particular, VADER shows the presence of sarcastic comments ranked as highly positive responses (see Appendix 1 for the top 10 ranked comments) and therefore validates the expectations emerged out of the reading of the sample as to the presence of sarcasm to invalidate the results offered by VADER. At this point, a sarcasm inspection was carried out using the News Headline Dataset (Misra 2019), a large-scale dataset⁷ gathering 11,725 records from *TheOnion*⁸ – an American satirical newspaper organisation – and 14,984 non-sarcastic records from the *HuffPost*⁹ – an American news aggregator – totalling 26,709 records. The dataset was implemented in Kaggle¹⁰ via data scientist Musah Khan’s notebook¹¹ through which the value of 0 is assigned for no sarcasm detected and 1 for sarcasm detected. Sarcasm was found in 55 out of 110 negative comments (50%); 50 out of 144 neutral comments (34.7%); and 104 out of positive 200 comments (52%) which amount to 209 sarcastic comments (46% of the WPUGC22 corpus). Though a well-established and shared definition of sarcasm is not available (Taylor 2017), in the light of previous studies demonstrating that sarcasm is com-

⁷ Available at: <https://github.com/rishabhmisra/Sarcasm-Detection-using-NN>.

⁸ www.theonion.com.

⁹ www.huffingtonpost.com.

¹⁰ A data science community offering tools and resources (<https://www.kaggle.com>).

¹¹ Available at: <https://www.kaggle.com/code/lazer999/sarcasm-detection-nlp-and-tf-for-beginners/comments>.

monly associated with negative sentiment (Kumar and Harish 2018), in case of identification of sarcastic comments, these were assigned a negative sentiment (*Tab. 2*). Since the average negative sentiment exceeds the positive sentiment, the corpus is said to have a *negative polarity*. This disparity in the number of negative comments compared to positive and neutral ones highlights a crystal-clear trend which might impair a constructive online environment that fosters meaningful discussions. It is crucial to understand the underlying reasons behind such a prevalence of negativity, considering the impact it might have on future readers of the same article. Indeed, negative comments can have a significant impact on the overall perception of a particular topic or issue and the presence of several negative comments may negatively influence future readers on the subject and push them to embrace a certain perspective just because it is accepted by the majority.

Table 2. – Sentiment and sarcasm analysis.

SEMANTIC ORIENTATION	AVERAGE INTENSITY	AMOUNT	PERCENTAGE
Negative	–	264 (209)	58.15% (46%)
Neutral	–	94	20.70%
Positive	–	96	21.15%

4.3. Frequency and keyword analysis

Frequent words and the keywords identified in the reading of the sample served as an initial guide for finding other related and unrelated expressions that may broaden the search for the discourses developed in the comments. In order to allocate the keywords to a particular discourse topic at this stage, it was necessary to look for both denotative semantic and social-historical links concerning the keywords, which was done by way of the KWIC tool. All the discourse topics that came up in the comments are shown in *Figure 2*.

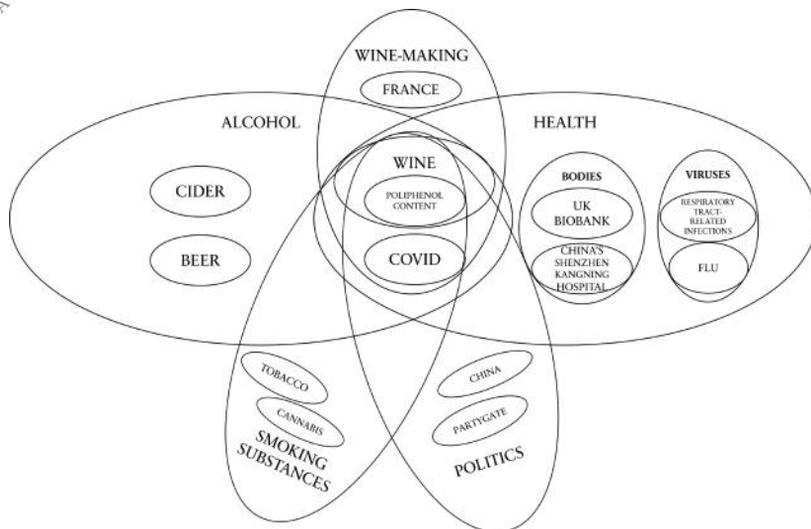


Figure 2. – Discourse topics in the comments.

4.4. Discourse analysis

At this stage, a discursive-historical analysis was carried out through the interpretation of the comments in an effort to comprehend the views and values hidden beneath them.

4.4.1. Wine-making and drinking tradition

One of the discourses emerging out of the comments is one on winemaking as well as the drinking tradition of certain nations (see Appendix 2). Certain users are amazed by the fact that COVID-19 has taken hold even in countries with a strong wine-making and drinking tradition, sometimes in a sarcastic manner. Amongst these countries are France, Italy, Spain, (South) America, and Australia, with France, however, totalling the largest number of occurrences by far. France was the world's second largest producer of wine in 2021 (Statista 2023, online) and ranked first among the top ten countries where alcohol is consumed most frequently (132 days). Also, it occupies the eighth spot in the top ten countries where people are most often drunk measured in days with an average of

4.4.2. Politics and commerce

Political discourse topics also emerge; in particular, two are clearly recognisable within the corpus. One concerns China (Appendix 4) and the other the Partygate issue (Appendix 5).

After the contentious and mysterious dynamics that led to the genesis and global propagation of the virus, political and personal positions are taken against China, the nation where the virus originated and the study observing its positive correlation with wine was conducted. Because it is unclear why people should accept a Chinese examination of UK data, allusions to China are used to promote scepticism regarding the report (comment 18, 20, 25, 29) – e.g., “Who would trust anything coming out of China now?” (20). Commenters are attempting to cast doubt on the data because of their elaboration in China, and they are implying that China may have had a role in it or tried to fudge the data related to this issue. Anger towards China also leads to boycott actions extending to other areas besides health – “Boycott anything Chinese. Do not watch the winter games. China must be held accountable” (28). Sarcasm is quite clear in comment 26 – “British figure analysed in China. Go figure!” –, as well as in comment 19 where the news outlet is indirectly blamed for reporting untrustworthy information – “DM (*Daily Mail*) proper accurate stories please....”. References to an alleged business desire to increase Chinese wine production are found in comment 21, 22, 24, and 27 – e.g., “[...] Most probably their wines are not selling fast enough” (22). These may also be classified as being part of the conspiratorial thread, as might be comment 23, which extends the political discourse to the USA by mentioning American virologist Anthony Fauci – “The survey and results are guaranteed by Fauci on behalf of China – allegedly!...”.

The Partygate scandal in the UK involved parties and gatherings of government officials during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021, when public health restrictions meant that most gatherings were prohibited. While restrictive measures of varying degrees to help slow the spread of the virus were in effect, dozens of gathering took place at 10, Downing Street – the official residence of the Prime Minister of the UK – and other government buildings and came under investigation by the Metropolitan Police. Of these, at least three of them were attended by the then-prime minister Boris Johnson. After the news was disclosed by the *Mirror*¹², 126 fixed penalty notices were issued by the police to 83

¹² See: Crerar 2021.

people attending the parties for breaking COVID-19 regulations, including Johnson and his wife. The discourse emerges through references to ‘mp’, ‘Downing Street (party)’ (5 occurrences), ‘Boris’ (5 occurrences) but also to ‘Keir Starmer’¹³ (2 occurrences) Leader of the Opposition and the Labour Party since April 4, 2020, and one of Boris Johnson’s fiercest opponents. In the comments, the subject is always brought up to create a sarcastic effect (Appendix 5 – comments from 30 to 38) – e.g., “So those at Downing Street were trying to protect themselves from Covid, so can work more for the country” (36). The idea that government authorities were aware of the benefits of wine in preventing the virus and that the meetings were conceived of as preventative measures rather than as chances to meet social needs is the foundation of sarcasm.

4.4.3. Other curative substances

References to other substances that are typically associated with a potential risk for health and for which there are studies supporting their efficacies in tackling COVID-19 are also spotted (Appendix 6). It is the case, for instance, for cannabis (van Breemen *et al.* 2022) and tobacco (Paleiron *et al.* 2021) in the face of WHO’s statement claiming that “smokers are more likely to suffer more severe outcomes of COVID-19, such as admission into intensive care units and death, than never smokers” (World Health Organization 2022, online). Paying particular attention to the specific cases of tobacco, there is also an official document on the former that argues: “[t]obacco users have a higher risk of being infected with the virus through the mouth while smoking cigarettes or using other tobacco products. If smokers contract the COVID-19 virus, they face a greater risk of getting a severe infection as their lung health is already compromised” (World Health Organization n.d., online). Sometimes seriously (comments 39, 41, and 42) and sometimes sarcastically (comments 40 and 43), people bring up the fact that wine has been added to the list of alternative curative substances – e.g., “Apparently so does cannabis” (39) and “So, there you have it, drinking wine and smoking weed protects you from the virus. You don’t have to tell me twice” (40). It is worth noting that comments 42 and 43 introduce more substances,

¹³ The actual words used in the comments are “Starma” and “Kier” but based on the context it is safe to assume that these are typos.

including crack, and purport personal testimony on the effectiveness of smoking and alcohol (whiskey) in preventing the virus.

4.4.4. Trust in the newspaper

The state of uncertainty is apparent in some comments where the newspaper is accused of offering contrasting views on the same topic (Appendix 7). The newspaper's editorial board is attacked for its inability to express a clear stance on whether wine is harmful or beneficial – e.g., “Next week it will be the opposite!” (46). This confusion aroused by newspapers might ultimately lead to an increased distrust towards official sources. This is because, in the long run, as ordinary people look for answers to their questions in official sources and get nothing but a series of conflicting information, they might eventually grow sceptical towards that source and equate it to unofficial sources. Indeed, it seems that after the accusations of publishing inconsistent information, they have not published an article in favour of wine since then. Although we cannot be sure whether this is a consequence of user feedback, there is still a likelihood that the news outlet operated accordingly.

5. FINAL REMARKS, LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The study focused on comments to a news item popularising the contents of a scientific article. The analysis of sentiment revealed that scepticism and sarcasm are dominant, and that sentiment is basically negative. Readers appear to chuckle at the news or to be sceptical of the official facts being more inclined to question the accuracy of information presented to them. It also highlights the potential influence of social media platforms in shaping public opinion, as sarcastic and sceptical comments seem to be prevalent in online discussions surrounding news items to counteract the share and spread of unverified or misleading content. In general, this instance of scepticism and distrust in the news story might contribute to building a fractured and polarised society. The discourses produced by the news are primarily political, commercial, and medical discourses; other illicit medications are mentioned, as are national business interests and recent political events, particularly those that were recent and local. While a minority of readers take its content seriously,

accusing the newspaper of disseminating conflicting news, they concurrently endorse conspiracy theories related to political and economic issues. Overall, the study can benefit news outlets in choosing their topics, as well as their editorial policies, and avoiding inconsistencies and bias.

From a methodological point of view, *para-replicability* (Partington 2009, 293-394) – denoting the process of extending and building on someone’s research by covering wider and different aspects on the same line as the previous work – was considered paramount; for this reason the method was developed out of an existing one and with a special thought to future studies that might refer back to it with the utmost clarity and reliability.

The trustworthiness of the corpus tools utilised in this study is mostly responsible for its shortcomings. VADER is capable of assessing a text’s sentiment, but in some instances, like the one observed for the present study, a text’s concealed meanings may deceive the software and make a study less reliable. When sarcasm was detected by another tool, countermeasures were immediately adopted. However, if on the one hand this helped make the results more accurate, the very definition of sarcasm makes the issue more complex. In a study of the differences between sarcasm and irony in Italian and English, Taylor (2017, 21) found that “there is a greater perception of face-attack in the behaviours described as sarcastic or SARCASTICO” (emphasis in the original) and that these are more commonly employed “to indicate behaviours with a target” (Taylor 2017, 33); despite this, sarcasm and irony are widely used as near-synonyms and are not easy to define.

Considering that the main goal of news outlets is to inform their readers to some degree, analysing readers’ reactions to news stories can help news outlets adjust their editorial policy and to decision-making processes in creating more engaging, attractive content or present it in more innovative ways. Future studies might observe how the emergence of discourse subjects develop in comments to the same article over a stretch time or how a direct comment on an article might subsequently inspire and develop a different discourse topic by another user.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. – Top 10-ranked comments per sentiment compound.

#	COMMENT ¹⁴	SENTIMENT COMPOUND	SARCASM DETECTION
1.	Great. That nice bottle of Italian red last night I enjoyed was great medicine.	0.936	Yes
2.	Best drink both to be on the safe side, then. Don't forget the pre drink of gin or whiskey to double down on your safety!	0.897	Yes
3.	Wow. Just wow. Research grant ad nauseum.	0.8779	Yes
4.	Actually, it's sunshine, fresh air, blueberries and exercise that will boost your immune system. This article is complete fantasy!	0.8655	No
5.	Brexit is wonderful, dreams can come true	0.8481	No
6.	I didn't believe that article, but this one is obviously true. Cheers!	0.8459	Yes
7.	Funny how no one is speaking much about the best way to stop Covid which is to have a healthy immune system! Stop drinking alcohol, eat a species specific and species appropriate diet, get plenty of sunlight and make sure you move around a bit (don't do lots of strenuous exercise). People in the Western world are generally unhealthy, you only need to have a quick look around to see that. How can we expect our immune system to function well when most of us have some kind of metabolic disorder? Even the ones who are super fit are at risk as the contestant stress their bodies are under does nothing to help the immune system.	0.8241	Yes
8.	Ha ha ha ha what a load of rubbish.	0.8225	No
9.	Blueberries are nice. I'd eat those all day long. Good food, good health.	0.8225	No
10.	I only smell the delicious fragrance when you take the top off a good pinot noir.	0.8126	Yes

¹⁴ Comments are reported according to sentiment score.

Appendix 2. – Wine-making and drinking tradition (France).

#	COMMENT	SENTIMENT COMPOUND	SARCASM DETECTION
1.	I really like the sound of what is suggested and will happily try it but I can't ignore the fact that France has a scary Covid situation and they drink red wine like its water!	0.6253	No
2.	I didn't know this, but I am not surprised. Wine is at the top when it comes to content of pesticides and it's not unreasonable that pesticides in your bloodstream could well help against viruses. There is no crop more sprayed with pesticides, particularly neurocidal INSECTICIDES. than wine grapes. In France, workers in vineyards who contract Parkinson's disease are compensated by the French government because it has statistically been found that insecticides are MORE than likely to be the cause of it.	0.5575	No
3.	According to this article, France, Italy, Spain should be 50% free of Covid due to the amount of wine they drink.	0.5106	No
4.	Funny that my Lady drinks wine and caught Covid, I drink beer and have never caught Covid, so that debunks that theory, did it come from France because they are selling less wine?	0.4404	Yes
5.	Sounds like something France or any other wineries would say just to sell more wine.	0.3612	Yes
6.	Who did the research? Macron?	0.0	Yes
7.	So, why is it massive in France?	0.0	No
8.	Is all this research carried out by red wine producers in France?	0	No
9.	It might just be true. There is no crop more sprayed with insecticides than wine grapes. Wine grapes have a couple of insects that can completely wipe out a vineyard's vines. Wine has the highest content of pesticides in it. The French government compensates vineyard workers who get Parkinson's. Perhaps it's the pesticides in the bloodstream of wine drinkers that fights off the covid virus. I'm just playfully offering up a dubious POSSIBLE. Keep on drinking it.	-0.25	No
10.	So, how many died in France with Covid?	-0.5574	No

Get a Job or Grab a Glass (of Wine)

Appendix 3. – Wine-making and drinking tradition (other countries).

#	COMMENT	SENTIMENT COMPOUND	SARCASM DETECTION
11.	Great. That nice bottle of Italian red last night I enjoyed was great medicine.	0.936	Yes
12.	Well, the Europeans tend to have longer average lives than the Brits, so maybe there's something in it. In general, not too sure about Covid, but on reflection, the Northern Italians, who tend to drink more beer, have had more Covid cases than further south! There's also been quite a number of 100yr old people in Italy, for instance, that have survived Covid, even if they caught it, so just maybe!	0.7888	No
13.	I am particularly attracted to South Australian Merlot and I have not had Covid!!	0.5686	No
14.	I'll stick to New World reds which are far superior to OLD French vinegar.	0.5423	Yes
15.	According to this article, France, Italy, Spain should be 50% free of Covid due to the amount of wine they drink.	0.5106	No
16.	So, I'll keep on drinking my bottle or two of the red vino collapso, does it matter which wine region it comes from, or does it have to be an Australian Sheep Dip Sauvignon 2019?	0.0258	Yes
17.	Red wine grown in many of the world's regions. You can purchase reds like you can water in many of the world's regions. still the Covid cases in the same regions is high. For example, Italy, Spain, South America, Australia. This is rubbish. I don't trust the science behind this study.	-0.0521	Yes

Appendix 4. – Politics and trade (China).

#	COMMENT	SENTIMENT COMPOUND	SARCASM DETECTION
18.	Well at long last we have some good news from China, that's if you're daft enough to believe anything from them.	0.6124	Yes
19.	Yeah really.....report from.... China.....says it allDM proper accurate stories please....	0.5423	Yes
20.	Who would trust anything coming out of China now?	0.5106	No
21.	When do we expect the first batch of China's very own red wine to grace the drinks section?	0.4215	No

22.	A statement from China I wouldn't believe. Most probably their wines are not selling fast enough.	0	No
23.	The survey and results are guaranteed by Fauci on behalf of China – allegedly!!	0	No
24.	Did not know China produced wine so obviously a sales pitch.	0	Yes
25.	Figures analysed in China. I'll keep an open mind.	0	Yes
26.	British figure analysed in China. Go figure!	0	Yes
27.	What the article should also point out is that in the last 5-10 years, many of the vineyards in the Bordeaux region of France have been bought out by... Chinese billionaires. Mmmm, think there's a connection?	0	Yes
28.	Boycott anything Chinese. Do not watch the winter games. China must be held accountable.	-0.3182	No
29.	The trouble with this story is they were all drinking some cheap Chinese red plonk. And Covid being a Chinese invention I'm reluctant to believe any of it!	-0.6114	Yes

Appendix 5. – Politics (Partygate).

#	COMMENT	SENTIMENT COMPOUND	SARCASM DETECTION
30.	So, there we have the truth, Boris and his Conservative friend must have known this back in May 2020 Party on Wayne.	0.802	Yes
31.	Great, is this is why Downing Street had the drinks party?!	0.7959	Yes
32.	Great, no vaccines for me I've just ordered 30 crates of red wine, let's party the Boris way.	0.7088	Yes
33.	Haha that is what Boris and his party cronies knew all along.	0.6908	Yes
34.	Which mp with shares in red wine wants a boost this month?	0.5994	Yes
35.	Did the study gather facts from Boris's party or Keir's?	0.4019	Yes
36.	So those at Downing Street were trying to protect themselves from Covid, so can work more for the country.	0.3818	Yes
37.	So that's why there were so many parties in downing street. They were a prophylactic means to avoid catching the virus. How long before boris uses this as a excuse?	0.2682	Yes

Get a Jab or Grab a Glass (of Wine)

38.	We're them drinking red wine at the Downing Street party. Starmer made an error again with the beer choice.	0.0	No
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Appendix 6. – Other curative substances.

#	COMMENT	SENTIMENT COMPOUND	SARCASM DETECTION
39.	Apparently so does cannabis.	0.6542	No
40.	So, there you have it, drinking wine and smoking weed protects you from the virus. You don't have to tell me twice.	0.5745	Yes
41.	At the start of the pandemic, Chinese scientists had observed that smokers were less prone to catching Covid!	0.4365	No
42.	Try Whisky. It kills everything else. So why wouldn't it kill that too. I'm not vaxxed and never had Covid. Every day I'm in my local bar, surrounded by other heavy drinkers and smokers. You would think a high-risk group and high-risk environment. Not one of them has ever had Covid.	0.0	No
43.	What's next? Smoking crack kills the virus dead in its tracks.	-0.8316	Yes

Appendix 7. – Trust in the newspaper.

#	COMMENT	SENTIMENT COMPOUND	SARCASM DETECTION
44.	There is a new story every week regarding wine etc and whether it is good or bad. This is probably more a coincidence than reality.	-0.2543	No
45.	We were being warned about the dangers of red wine the other day. Pick the expert that suits you best!	-0.2587	No
46.	Next week it will be the opposite!	-0.2589	No
47.	Last week red wine was good for your heart yesterday it wasn't but today it's good for Covid sufferers.	-0.5689	No
48.	Until Monday, Wednesday and Friday when the opposite studies are revealed.	-0.6643	No

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Boosting Booster Trust: Negotiating a Jungle of Misinformation

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ABSTRACT

Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are available across diverse media, causing distrust in governmental and health institutions. In this context, the use of language has been of great interest in research, specifically in health communication, on social media, and in traditional news media. Our aim is to analyse and compare how the successive doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have been presented in different forms of knowledge communication, namely scientific research papers and the media, including online magazines and newspaper articles. By focusing on frequency, collocates, and phraseology of *booster* and *dose*, we trace differences in how boosters are presented in both lay and professional contexts of communication. Scientific discourse shows a marked preference for the more neutral and cautious term *dose*, which is also associated with the description of administration procedures. News discourse is characterised both by a higher incidence of the word *booster* (implying a reinforcement of an already existing immunity) and by the choice of referring to the institutional voices recommending vaccines. Results shed light on how different discourses manifest their perceived functions through lexical choice, as well as how news discourse uses and reinterprets scientific discourse in the light of what is relevant to the audience.

Keywords: collocation analysis; knowledge dissemination; professional communication; textual voices; vaccine communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective health communication plays a crucial role in times of crisis. Clear, accurate, and accessible communication about health-related information serves as a vital tool for fostering trust in public health institutions, disseminating reliable information, debunking misinformation, and addressing public concerns. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only presented significant challenges to global health systems but has also highlighted the pervasive issues of misinformation and disinformation, which are both defined by the European Commission as false or misleading content. However, while misinformation is intentionally used “to deceive or secure economic or political gain”, disinformation is unintentional but may still be harmful¹. Both misinformation and disinformation have had far-reaching consequences, impacting public health, social dynamics, and public trust in governmental and health institutions. In particular, fear and distrust in governmental and health institutions have played a central role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes. As a response to the rampant spread of misinformation, the European Commission, for example, has recognised the urgency of tackling fake news related to COVID-19. In their “Code of Practice on Disinformation”, the Commission has outlined regulations specifically targeting the dissemination of false information concerning the pandemic. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of health communication has emerged as a crucial element in maintaining information exchange and forming the foundation for collective action (de Las Heras-Pedrosa, Sánchez-Núñez, and Peláez 2020, 2). Governments, health organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), mass media, and stakeholders have all been compelled to manage communication about the impact of the pandemic and appropriate responses to the critical moments (Zhang, Huijie, and Chen 2020) in the rapid evolving of the pandemic.

In this setting, media discourse and scientific discourse have played an important role. The urgent need for diagnostic and therapeutic solutions has led to a dramatic surge in scientific publishing (Hyland and Jiang 2021), with research discourse gaining significant prominence: in what the World Health Organization (WHO) labelled as an ‘infodemic’ of published output, researchers exploited hyperbolic and promotional

¹ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation#:~:text=Disinformation%20is%20false%20or%20misleading,which%20may%20cause%20public%20harm> [14/11/2023].

language to get their research noticed by boosting aspects of their work, such as certainty, contribution, novelty, and potential. At the same time, the world followed scientific discoveries and results mostly through the words of the media, which played a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a primary source of information for many individuals, the media holds the power to influence public opinion and impact collective responses to the health crisis. News outlets, social media platforms, and other media channels have served as conduits for disseminating updates, sharing expert insights, and reporting on the evolving nature of the pandemic. Understanding the role of scientific and media discourse in the pandemic from an applied linguistics perspective allows us to examine the language choices, framing techniques, and discursive practices employed, evaluate their impact on public perception, and contribute to understanding effective strategies for responsible and accurate health communication.

While numerous studies have explored the role of health communication in the media, social media, and government releases during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dyer and Kolic 2020; Bernard *et al.* 2021; Depaula *et al.* 2022), most have focused on one specific medium. Müller, Bartsch, and Zinn (2021), for example, provide a comprehensive overview of expressions of uncertainty in British and German press discourse, revealing distinct trends in the two contexts: while markers of possibility and probability are similarly frequent, uncertainty is more commonly expressed through references to anxiety in the British context and disagreement in the German context. Similarly, Liu and Liu (2021) have also looked at traditional news media while other scholars have concentrated on public attitudes towards vaccines in social media (Atehortua and Patino 2021; Thelwall, Kousha, and Thelwall 2022) or blogs (Curry and Pérez-Paredes 2021).

Many have investigated the metaphoric dimension of public health communication. Semino (2021), for example, has examined various metaphors used in pandemic communication, with a particular close-up on the fire metaphor: the metaphor conveys notions of danger, urgency, the risk of contagion, the role of healthcare workers, and the connection to health inequalities. Another metaphorical field that has been explored extensively has been the construction of the war frame, whether in political speeches (e.g., Olimat 2020 on Trump) or in social media (e.g., Wicke and Bolognesi 2021 on Twitter).

Others have studied the evolving of the pandemic through its different phases and the various functions of the media. Abdulhadi and Abbas

(2021), for example, have paid attention to how the media exercise their power to deliver ideological and political perspectives through the coverage of the first case of COVID-19 in Jordan in local and nonlocal Arabic news. The analysis shows how nonlocal news stories included words with negative connotations that could contribute to resentment and panic, while the local news used more reassuring phrases. Jiang and Hyland (2022) have looked at news coverage through the year 2020, showing that news in the early months was dominated by the symptoms of the virus, with items relating to controlling the disease such as *guidelines*, *protocols* and, eventually, *vaccine*, becoming increasingly prominent, thus helping us see the changing public interest in the pandemic.

However, there is still a noticeable scarcity in research examining convergences and divergences between the discourse of experts and the discourse of the media. Bondi and Cavalieri (2022) have analysed and compared communicative functions of risk-related terms during the pandemic in scientific and diplomatic discourse, while Corrizzato and Cavalieri (2022) have explored the use of hypothetical questions in media interviews about the pandemic to diplomats and experts. Thus, the present study aims to address this gap by investigating lexical choices in scientific and journalistic discourse from a discourse-analytical perspective. We also focus on later stages of the pandemic, while still encompassing a larger time-frame. The initial phase of the pandemic was filled with anxiety and uncertainty as the world was grappling with the novel virus. In the second half of 2020 the race against time to develop a vaccine brought a renewed sense of optimism. Moreover, as time passed, new variants of the virus emerged in 2021, characterised by the potential to partially evade the immunity provided by the initial vaccine doses. This involved the administration of the third and fourth doses, especially recommended for the elderly, healthcare workers, and immunocompromised individuals. Our work centres on the use of near-synonyms *booster* and *dose* in this later phase of the pandemic. The two terms are often used interchangeably. Their meaning and the sense they acquire in context is, nonetheless, worth exploring. We do this through a comparative analysis of online press and scientific publications. By delving into these two distinct sources, we aim not only to highlight the different ways in which the two forms of knowledge communication portray vaccine boosters, but also to provide insights into how information is communicated to the public.

This study addresses two simple research questions: How do scientific and journalistic discourses reflect attitudes towards the third and

fourth dose of the vaccine, in the development of the various phases of vaccination? How do they use the near-synonyms *booster* and *dose*? By way of a preliminary analysis, we also thought it would be useful to investigate how scientific and journalistic discourse reflect negative attitudes towards vaccines, thus taking into consideration expressions like *no-vax*, *vaccine hesitancy*.

The paper is organised as follows: section 2 introduces the corpora and the methodological framework used for our study. Section 3 presents the results of the preliminary overview of the expressions *no(-)vax* and *vaccine hesitancy* – together with its synonyms, and subsequently provides a qualitative analysis of their collocations. Sections 4 and 5 look at *booster* and *dose*, with a focus on *fourth dose* and *second booster*, examining frequencies, collocations and attribution to different textual voices. The conclusion summarises the comparative outcomes of the analysis of different forms of knowledge communication.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to explore how vaccine discourse is presented in two different genres and forms of knowledge communication, we used two databases available online, namely the COVID-19 Open Research Dataset corpus (CORD-19)² and the Coronavirus Corpus³. On the one hand, the former consists of more than 370,000 scientific articles (1,794,546,039 tokens) about coronavirus and related topics which were released as part of the COVID-19 Open Research Dataset and that is now available on Sketch Engine. On the other hand, the Coronavirus Corpus is representative of online media discourse as it consists of newspapers and magazines belonging to twenty different English-speaking countries. It is a 1,492,979,248 words corpus and it has been regularly updated by 4 million words each day from January 2020 to December 2022. It is built from a subset of the NOW Corpus (Davies 2021), and it contains news collected from the daily scraping of more than 1,000 websites where at least two occurrences of the terms *coronavirus*, *COVID* or *COVID-19* appear.

² Available on Sketch Engine: <https://www.sketchengine.eu/covid-19-corpus/>.

³ Available on English-Corpora: <https://www.english-corpora.org/corona/>.

Our analysis followed two main steps. First, we looked at the general associations of modifiers, nouns, and verbs related to the set of word forms that defined negative attitudes to vaccines, such as *no-vax* – and all its possible written forms, i.e., *novax* and *no vax*, and *vaccine hesitancy*, which has also been cited by the WHO as an important issue when facing the immunization programme⁴. To have a complete overview, we also included *hesitancy*'s synonyms, namely *skepticism*, *reluctance*, *indecision*, *irresolution*, and *uncertainty*, which were retrieved from Thesaurus⁵. We then focused on *booster dose*, *booster* and *dose*.

On Sketch Engine, from which we had access to the CORPUS-19 Corpus, we were able to carry out a comparison using the function “Word Sketch Difference” which allows to visualise and compare collocates of the selected words under scrutiny. On English-corpora instead, from which we had access to the Coronavirus corpus, we carried out the same analysis by using the function “Collocates” and then selected the type of collocate we wanted to analyse for each of our words of interest (e.g., adjective, noun, verb). Within the lists generated by both platforms, we then investigated collocations and semantic preferences (Sinclair 2004) of the two sets of word forms. Frequencies were normalised for 1,000,000 words (pmw).

As our aim is to focus on a comparison between knowledge dissemination in both scientific and press discourse, for the main stage of our analysis we also studied and compared the use of *fourth dose* and *second booster* in both of our corpora. In this case, we selected 200 random concordances for each of our words of interest in both databases and examined both pragmatic functions and phraseological patterns of our node words. Specifically, we looked at how such terms are presented within the debate on vaccines, and related their use to the textual choices adopted to present such issues.

⁴ <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-08-2015-vaccine-hesitancy-a-growing-challenge-for-immunization-programmes#:~:text=In%20a%20special%20issue%20of,despite%20availability%20of%20vaccination%20services> [14/11/2023].

⁵ Thesaurus: <https://www.thesaurus.com/>.

3. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Table 1 below shows the relative frequency pmw of *no-vax*, *novax*, *no vax*, *vaccine hesitancy*, *vaccine skepticism*, *vaccine reluctance*, *vaccine indecision*, *vaccine resolution*, and *vaccine uncertainty* in both our corpora. As we can see, *vaccine hesitancy* is not only mostly preferred among its synonyms in both corpora, but it is also generally more frequent than *no(-)vax*. Moreover, *no(-)vax* seems to be used more frequently in news discourse (with a total of 0.20 hits) in comparison with scientific discourse (0.06 total).

Table 1. – Frequencies of “no-vax”, “vaccine hesitancy” and its synonyms in the CORD-19 and in the Coronavirus Corpus (frequency pmw).

SEARCH TERMS	CORD-19	CORONAVIRUS CORPUS
<i>no-vax</i>	0.02	0.04
<i>no vax</i>	0.03	0.14
<i>novax</i>	0.01	0.03
<i>vaccine hesitancy</i>	15.92	8.41
<i>vaccine skepticism</i>	0.15	0.62
<i>vaccine reluctance</i>	0.08	0.08
<i>vaccine indecision</i>	0	0
<i>vaccine resolution</i>	0	0
<i>vaccine uncertainty</i>	0	0.01

• *no(-)vax*

The use of the various forms of *no(-)vax* is extremely limited in Research Articles (RAs), with a total of 107 occurrences (0.06 hits pmw). It is mostly used to qualify terms referring to social agents (e.g., *faction*, *follower*, *movement*) and to explain or reformulate specific technical terms (e.g., *vaccine hesitancy*) in more popular terms. In most cases the expression refers to pre-COVID situations (1).

- (1) The missed vaccination issue is part of the wider phenomenon of the parental vaccine hesitancy (“*no-vax* movements”) in which religious and moral beliefs, complacency and skepticism made the perception of vaccine as scary and unnecessary.

In the Coronavirus Corpus instead, *no(-)vax* is comparatively much more frequent than in the CORD-19 one, with 302 occurrences (0.21 pmw). Moreover, by exploring the diachronic trend of the use of *no(-)vax* in the

Coronavirus Corpus, we see that it is mostly concentrated between February 2021 and June 2022, which might coincide with the later vaccine campaigns. The expression *no(-)vax* is used to qualify groups of people that do not want to receive a vaccine (e.g., *health care workers, nurse, people ...*). However, in journalistic discourse it refers systematically to vaccines against COVID-19. It also more often qualifies single individuals and carries a wider range of negative connotations. The phraseological constructions that include *no(-)vax* seem to depict no-vax people as the cause of the spread of the contagion of the virus (e.g., [contagion] caused by a “*no-vax nurse*”), or as a problem that cannot be avoided (e.g., *no-vax people exist everywhere*) and that needs to be eradicated (e.g., *no-vax are to be eliminated*). All this conveys the general idea that no-vax people represent danger themselves. *No-vax* also appears in relation to government measures and policies for those who are not vaccinated, and it is mostly reported in slogan-like formats (e.g., *no vax no gigs; no vax no job; no vax no ride, no vax no service*). This clearly highlights the negative connotations of the expression and, in particular, its oppositional and ambivalent nature, as slogans summarise the various social problems created by the contrast between public health policies and no-vax positions. However, as we are dealing with news discourse, it is not surprising to find *no-vax* followed by speech verbs (e.g., *argue, believe ...*), which give visibility to the movement and report the voices of people who are not in favour of the COVID-19 vaccine (e.g., *no-vax health care workers argue that ...*). Altogether, the expression is used mostly in news discourse and mostly to qualify movements and individuals in relation to the problems they cause to health policies, with the effects of polarising positions.

• *Vaccine hesitancy*

We will specifically focus on *vaccine hesitancy*, not only because it is the most frequent collocation among its synonyms, but also because it is in line with the terminology adopted by the WHO (see section 2).

Vaccine hesitancy is by far the more neutral term. In the COVID-19 Corpus *vaccine hesitancy* occurs 28,574 times (15.92 pmw), so it is much more frequent than *no-vax*. It is often followed by predicative adjectives which mostly specify the extension/expansion of the phenomenon (e.g., *vaccine hesitancy is common/higher, present/widespread ...*) and its consequences (*effects of vaccine hesitancy are widespread ...*). Moreover, *vaccine hesitancy* frequently co-occurs with *misconception, mistrust* and *distrust*,

discourse employs the more polarising term *no-vax* more frequently and even with *vaccine hesitancy* pays much more significant attention to the social problems faced or created by these groups, as well as to the perceived causes of vaccine hesitancy, often associated with misinformation. When referring to negative positions towards vaccines, it is not surprising that – within the framework of a largely shared set of collocations – scientific discourse should show a marked preference for the more specialised expression and an emphasis on the impact of the problem, while news discourse will be more open to polarised expressions and to exploring (if not trying to counteract) the causes of negative positions. However, scientific discourse discusses hesitancy in relation to people’s mistrust in expert discourse, while news discourse sees misinformation as the main cause.

4. FOCUS ON “BOOSTER” AND “DOSE”

The sequence of vaccination campaigns during the pandemic extended the debate over vaccine hesitancy, which was further reinforced by the uncertainty over vaccine efficacy after the first dose (Kissler *et al.* 2020). Initially worried about the potential side effects of the vaccine, and later frustrated by the need to repeat the vaccine, many people needed to be reassured of the importance of these renewed campaigns. In medical terms a dose is simply the quantity of a pharmaceutical product that is necessary to obtain a specific effect. A booster, instead, is a vaccination given after a previous vaccination that helps maintain or increase a protective immune response. How far is this difference reflected in scientific discourse and in the news?

Table 2 below displays the quantitative use of *booster dose*, *booster*, and *dose* in RAs (CORD-19) and in the news (Coronavirus Corpus). As we can see, while the use of *booster dose* is relatively rare in both corpora, *booster* is rarely used in RAs (18.45 hits pmw), and much more frequent in the news (107.20 hits pmw). *Dose* is clearly predominant in both corpora with a frequency of 294.35 hits pmw in RAs and 168.20 hits pmw in the news.

Table 2. – Frequencies of “booster” and “dose” in the CORD-19 and in the Coronavirus Corpus (pmw).

SEARCH TERMS	CORD-19	CORONAVIRUS CORPUS
<i>Booster dose</i>	5.28	12.33
<i>Booster</i>	18.45	107.20
<i>Dose</i>	294.35	168.20

Table 3 below shows the relative frequency of the number of boosters and doses’ shots (e.g., *first/second/third/fourth dose*, and *first/second/third booster*) in the two corpora under study. As we can see, *first* and *second dose* are the ones mentioned the most in both corpora, especially in news discourse. Now, *third dose*, *fourth dose* and *fifth dose*, which respectively correspond to *first booster*, *second booster*, and *third booster* do not show a systematic trend. As a matter of fact, while *third dose* is used more frequently than *first booster* in both corpora, in news discourse there is a preference for *second booster*, while in the academic and scientific one *fourth dose* is the one used the most. *Third booster*, instead, is preferred over *fifth dose* in both corpora. However, in the RAs corpus, starting from *third dose*, all expressions are used seldom, suggesting that scientific interest in the specificities of these doses is comparatively low, whereas news discourse shows much greater interest.

Table 3. – Frequencies of “first-second-third-fourth dose” and “first-second-third booster” in the RAs and in the News Corpus (pmw).

[No.] “DOSE”/“BOOSTER”	CORD-19	CORONAVIRUS CORPUS
<i>first dose</i>	12.93	32.21
<i>second dose</i>	17.37	30.79
<i>third dose</i>	3.52	9.59
<i>fourth dose</i>	0.45	2.75
<i>fifth dose</i>	0.03	0.08
<i>first booster</i>	0.08	1.30
<i>second booster</i>	0.18	3.67
<i>third booster</i>	0.32	1

Before examining *booster* and *dose* in each of our databases, we will briefly compare the use of *booster dose* in both corpora. Table 4 below provides the reader with an overview of the lexical choices and functional units that characterise *booster dose* in both corpora.

Table 4. – Lexical choices and functional units of “booster dose” in the *CORD-19* and *Coronavirus corpus*.

	CORD-19	CORONAVIRUS CORPUS
Lexical choices	Technical modifiers	General modifiers Numbers and percentages
Functional units	Stating cause-effect Presenting hypothesis/ stating methods Providing recommendations	Reporting vaccine administration Describing advantages and disadvantages Providing explanation

By looking at its use in RAs, we see that it is mostly preceded by technical items referring to the type of vaccine (e.g., *heterologous*, *homologous*, *mRNA*, *Pfizer-BioNTech*) or to the number of shots (e.g., *first*, *second*, *third*, *fourth*). *First booster dose* refers to the second shot of vaccine, while *homologous* and *heterologous* respectively refer to whether or not the booster shot involves the same brand of vaccine as the one that had been previously administered. In RAs, *booster dose* is mostly presented in terms of cause-effect (e.g., *after a first/third booster dose ...*), hypothesis of research or stating methods (e.g., *we assumed that 7 days after receiving a booster dose, effectiveness against infection and hospitalisation is 95%*) or for recommendations which might be stated by citing health and governmental institutions (e.g., *NHMRC recommends booster doses every ten years for all adults*) or through agentless author forms of self-mention (e.g., *a booster dose is recommended after 5 years*).

Within news discourse, instead, we notice that *booster dose* is mostly preceded by more general modifiers (e.g., *at least one*, *bivalent*, *even a single*, *precautionary*), contributing to a sense of vagueness surrounding the narrative concerning boosters and vaccines. At a phraseological level, the focus is mostly on people and administration of the vaccine (e.g., *administered*, *got*, *received ...*) rather than on experimental procedures like in RAs. Phrases are mostly informative, not always providing precise numbers and percentages of people who have received a booster dose (e.g., *the number of adults who had received their COVID-19 vaccine booster dose had increased to 12,157,974 individuals*). Advantages and disadvantages of booster doses are also reported (e.g., *data from other countries indicate that a booster dose may provide marginal benefit only for ...*) as well as institutional voices that prompt the public to take the booster. In other cases, *booster dose* is followed by explanation (e.g., *a booster dose is given to boost the antibodies ...*) most likely to reassure and inform the wider public.

4.1. *Booster and dose in RAs*

When exploring the collocations of our node words, we notice that *booster* is mainly preceded by scientific terms and acronyms which reveal specificities and details on the type of booster (e.g., *AZD1222*, *MRNA*, *third dose*, *fourth dose*, *tetanus*), with the interesting exception of *morale*, which is used to describe the encouragement that boosters are giving to people (2).

- (2) The vaccination programme was described as a *great morale booster*, coming at a time when many GPs and the wider public needed hope.

Nominal constructions qualified by *booster* are related to the vaccine administration (e.g., *dose*, *immunization*, *jab*, *shot*, etc.), the health campaign (e.g., *campaign*, *uptake*) and people's attitudes towards it (e.g., *hesitancy*, *intention*, *willingness*). Verbs collocating with *booster* are mostly related with the administration of the vaccine (e.g., *administer*, *give*, *receive*) and with its recommendation (e.g., *In September 2021, CDC initially recommended Pfizer vaccine boosters for older persons and those at heightened risk*).

Conversely, *dose* seems to be a more general term adopted in various contexts and it does not always appear in relation to the COVID-19 vaccine. As a matter of fact, it frequently collocates with items related to medical treatments or to potential interactions and side effects of the dose (e.g., *infectious*, *lethal* ...), mostly in experiment and laboratory situations. When referring to COVID-19, it is mainly preceded by ordinal numbers (e.g., *first*, *second*, *third* ...) referring to the respective vaccine administration, and by lexical items related to quantifications and changes (*escalation*, *modification*, *reduction* ...). When in relation to the vaccine, verbs that co-occur with *dose* mostly refer once again to its administration (e.g., *administer*, *receive*, etc.). In scientific discourse, to sum up, the preference for *dose* is much more marked and clearly associated with the description of administration procedures.

4.2. *Booster and dose in the news*

On the one hand, when looking at the modifiers of *booster* in the news, we find fewer technical terms than in RAs; the preferred qualifiers point at the current social and political issues (*broad*, *social*, *wider*, etc.), while nouns refer to the health campaign (e.g., *a booster blitz*, *a fall booster cam-*

paign, morale booster for the troops). Such nouns (e.g., *blitz, campaign, troops*) are once again associated to a military lexicon. Verbs co-occurring with *booster*, instead, can be mainly divided into two categories. The first includes references to the administration of the shot, with a focus on people who have (or have not) received the booster (e.g., *get, give, receive ...*). The second one includes voices of governmental and health institutions approving or recommending vaccines (e.g., *The FDA has authorized the COVID-19 vaccine booster shots for ..., Dr. Chierian recommends getting your COVID-19 booster ...*). It also co-occurs with verbs reporting scientific results on its efficacy (e.g., *a study found that a third booster dose ...*).

On the other hand, *dose* typically refers to the types of trials administered during the vaccine campaign (e.g., *double, triple*), while still being preceded by more evaluative terms (e.g., *harsh, safest, smallest*), most of which seem to respond to the need to reassure the general public (3).

- (3) [...] correct amount of dose, to ensure that people get the correct second dose.

Dose is also frequently found in a metaphorical use, even if not strictly related to the booster itself, but still to the pandemic situation (e.g., *a harsh dose of reality, a hefty dose of uncertainty*). Moreover, nouns in relation to *dose* are related to the field of quantification (e.g., *milligrams, percentages*, etc.) and to specific pharmaceuticals (e.g., *aspirin, examethasone, remdesivir*, etc.), concentrating on potential therapeutical indications. Verbs co-occurring with *dose* are similar to those that are used with *booster*, namely speech verbs reporting institutional voices recommending the vaccine (e.g., *need, recommend, require*). *Dose* also co-occurs with verbs regarding the administration of the vaccine (e.g., *administer, get, give*, etc.), highlighting once again the attention on people.

Overall, from a first analysis it seems that the use of *booster* and *dose* shows many common elements in the two corpora. However, while in RAs both terms are more associated to technicalities and administration procedures, in the press – where booster represents a more important proportion of occurrences - both expressions seem to be more related to the communication of therapeutical indication and on the part of various authorities. Knowledge dissemination through news discourse is thus characterised not only by a higher incidence of the word *booster* (implying that the subjects are already immune and that their immune system is being stimulated), but also by the choice of clearly reporting the institutional voices recommending vaccines. All this seems to contribute to the

public role of the media and could be related to the intention of reassuring the wider public about the efficacy of public health policies through the reported voice of medical experts.

5. FOCUS ON TEXTUAL VOICES: THE CASE OF “FOURTH DOSE” AND “SECOND BOOSTER”

As we understand that both academic discourse and news discourse do not simply represent the voice of the author, we chose a case study for a closer analysis of which voices are reported and what preferences they show. An investigation of *fourth dose* and *second booster* in both corpora might also help further highlight the difference between the two discourses.

5.1. *Textual voices in RAs*

The analysis of concordances of the terms in RAs shows that in 80% of the cases, their use is explicitly or implicitly attributed to the authors, describing the research carried out. Both terms are used within phraseological patterns describing cause and effect of the phenomena observed (*after/following/when receiving a second booster*), which are typical of the methodology and results section:

- (4) Following a *second booster dose*, circulating neutralizing antibody levels were sustained without any discernible decay over a 9-month period.

The researcher remains mostly invisible and implicitly cited in the conducted work (5), even if there are also few cases in which researchers address themselves and give their opinions and recommendations through a form of “exclusive we” (6).

- (5) In addition, the patients received a *second booster dose*, which influences the day 42 and 3 months responses.
- (6) [...] consideration the waning immunity, we suggest a *second booster dose* with BNT for the individuals [...].

The literature review, instead, typically attributes the expression to other scholars or even to the general debate (7). In a limited number of cases reference to boosters or doses is attributed to studies conducted by health institutions, pharmaceutical houses, and government authorities (8).

- (7) A *second booster dose* of COVID-19 vaccine is a widely discussed issue globally.
- (8) French National Authority for Health has recommended the use of a *second booster* dose in immunosuppressed patients. (Santé 2022)

Overall, in RAs there are no significant differences in the use of the two expressions according to voice. In both cases, the dominant voice is that of the author, who can be held responsible for the widely held preference for the phrase with the more neutral term *dose*. There also seems to be a preference for an impersonal style where the researchers’ voices are mostly invisible and are present through agentless and locational forms of self-mention. This might contribute to increasing the reliability of the objectivity of results and information regarding COVID-19 vaccines.

5.2. Textual voices in news discourse

Figure 1 below looks more closely at the textual voices involved in news discourse. It shows the quantitative distribution of *second booster* and *fourth dose* in the press, according to whether the use of the word is unattributed (directly manifesting the journalist’s choice) or attributed to experts, public authorities, other governments, or lay people. Both *fourth dose* and *second booster* are frequently reported through public authorities and experts’ voices and are rarely unattributed.

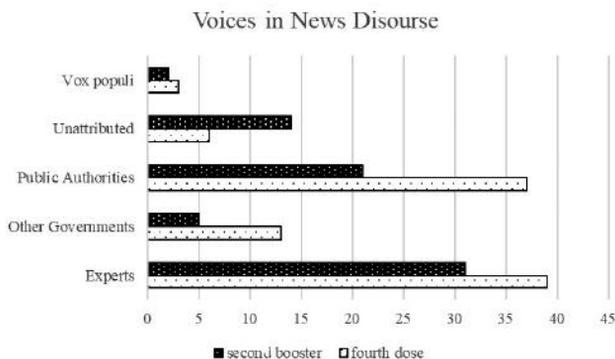


Figure 1. – Distribution of voices regarding “second booster” and “fourth dose” in news discourse.

The figure shows that there are no relevant differences in the use of second booster and fourth dose, except for the voice of the journalists,

which is the only one confirming a decided preference for *booster*. However, both terms are mostly reported through the voices of scientists (e.g., *CDC*, *Dr [Surname]*, *researchers* ...), and institutional authorities (e.g., *Biden*, *FDA*, *Government*, *Minister* ...), which are also mentioned in a less explicit way (*data*, *in clinical trials*, *studies* ...). It thus becomes noticeable that the voices of experts are reported in ways that by no means reflect their own lexical choice, but rather that of the journalist, as the frequency of *booster* in reported medical discourse is surprisingly high. The expression is obviously felt to be more suited to knowledge dissemination – even if hardly used in expert-to-expert communication.

To sum up, in news discourse dissemination of information on the second booster (fourth dose) seems to be realised through specialists and authorial institutional voices, so to achieve credibility and trustworthiness. In conveying information about the vaccine, the press seems to be part of a process of knowledge dissemination that provides information to the audience in what seems to be the most relevant terms, by choosing the reassuring implications (immunity strengthening) of *booster*.

6. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, our study has explored convergences and divergences of expert and media discourse in the use of specific lexical choices during the pandemic. The aim was to look at how vaccine-related vocabulary varied according to the communicative functions of different genres and discourses: academic research articles and news stories.

The preliminary analysis of *no(-)vax* and *vaccine hesitancy* has confirmed a different use and function of such expressions in the scientific and news contexts. As a matter of fact, *no(-)vax* is used to describe an opposition group in mostly evaluative terms, whereas *vaccine-hesitancy* carries nuances of uncertainty through a more descriptive function. While scientific discourse shows very limited use of *no(-)vax*, news discourse refers to *no(-)vax* in a more subjective way, with strong connotations and often manifesting solid positioning. The more scientific *hesitancy*, instead, is used to map different positions within the issue of vaccines, but at the same time often provides no further explanation on the debate. It was also noticed that scientific discourse discusses hesitancy in relation to people's mistrust in expert discourse, while news discourse sees misinformation as the main cause.

The overview on *booster* and *dose* has shown that *dose* is clearly the preferred expression in scientific discourse, whereas *booster* and *dose* are much more similar in frequency in the news. Overall, while in RAs both terms are more associated to technicalities and in particular to general administration procedures, in the press both expressions seem to be more related to the communication of therapeutic indication and on the part of various authorities.

On the one hand, the decided preference of scientific discourse for the more neutral term *dose* may be seen as one of the many signs of caution typically presented by research communication: as *booster* implies a strengthening of the effect of the previous vaccine, medical discourse prefers to use the more neutral term with no such implications. This may also be related to the frequent choice of heterologous vaccination, where a combination of viral vector vaccines and mRNA vaccines makes it difficult to consider one a booster of the other. On the other hand, the corpus of media texts showed greater interest in the term *booster*, with its implication that the successive dose would be strengthening a response that is already there. The presence of authoritative institutional voices supporting official policies emphasises the message about the efficacy of vaccination. If the choice of impersonal forms in scientific discourse conveys objectivity, the choice of quoting experts and institutional voices in the media confirms that these textual voices are instrumental in building trust with the public and counteracting misinformation.

We also hope to have highlighted how lexical choices respond to the different purposes of the two discourses: what science uses to interpret data, the press uses to identify issues and positions. The preference for *dose* in scientific discourse is closely related to a scientific focus on correct epistemology, sound argument and clear definitions. *Dose* is perceived and reproduced as the more scientific term with specialised collocations not only to classify types of vaccines, but especially to report therapeutic indications. The greater emphasis placed by the news on *booster* and on general policies, positions, and needs can be related to their public function in knowledge dissemination, which is recontextualizing scientific knowledge for the needs of the audience and for the needs of society. The press does not adopt the same cautious lexical choice of scientific discourse and, even when quoting medical experts, tends to prefer the expression with positive implications, with a view to rebuilding trust in their readers. The interplay of lexical choices and textual voices is thus key to understanding the power of news discourse: the power not only to decide whose voices are reported and what for, but also to reinterpret scientific discourse in the light of what is relevant to the audience.

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Flouting the Truth

A Pragmatic Study of Conspiracy Beliefs at the Time of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019, a multitude of conspiracy theories have started floating around which ascribe the origins of the virus to a range of causes. Against this backdrop, the chapter aims at demonstrating how conspiracy beliefs are linguistically created in news and social media. For this purpose, adopting an approach which combines Grice's Cooperative Maxims with the principles of Cognitive Linguistics, our study delves into a set of documents available on free online fact-checking organizations as well as Tweets, Facebook posts and speeches released by influential voices and ordinary people. The research demonstrates how unconventional metaphors and metonymies, unexpected syntactic patterns and dispreferred windowing of attention, as well as other linguistic devices, contribute to flouting or violating the Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relevance and Manner (Grice 1975; 1989) thus constructing false claims and mis-/dis-information.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics; conspiracy theories; COVID-19; Grice's Cooperative Principle; social media.

1. INTRODUCTION

On 30 January 2020, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared “the novel coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), WHO's highest level of alarm” (WHO 2020a). Since then, “the Coronavirus pandemic has been accompanied by an unprecedented

“infodemic” (Jourová, June 4, 2020)¹, thus causing the propagation of a huge amount of deliberately constructed myths and conspiracy theories through Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms (Kouzy *et al.* 2020),

The virus of disinformation and fake news has been spreading faster than the coronavirus itself and, at the time of writing this article (May 2023), many gray areas and unanswered questions still remain concerning the origins of the virus, the timing of its appearance, its mode of transmission, impact on patients, features, and potentialities in terms of mutation.

The phenomenon has fueled a multitude of studies in various research areas. International organizations (e.g., the WHO), fact-checking agencies (e.g. Poynter, FactCheck, Ap News) as well as academics from various fields have been struggling to debunk the variety of myths developing around COVID-19, such as 5G, the Wuhan lab and the microchips conspiracy theories.

As conspiracy theories involve “allegation(s) of conspiracy that may or may not be true” (Douglas *et al.* 2019, 3), the paper aims at demonstrating how conspiracy beliefs based on ‘false truths’ are discursively constructed in the news and on social media. For this purpose, we adopt an approach which combines a Gricean perspective (Grice 1975; 1989) with cognitive principles (Evans and Green 2006; Kleinke 2010) to delve into a set of corpora compiled using datasets from free online fact-checking resources (e.g. Poynter, FactCheck.org) as well as Tweets, Facebook posts and speeches released by influential voices worldwide, in order to demonstrate how the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner are flouted or violated (Grice 1975; 1989) to construct false claims and misinformation.

The chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on the misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories which have been formulated around the COVID pandemic from January 2020 to July 2020. Section 3 illustrates the theoretical and methodological background underlying the research. Sections 4 reports the case studies and results. Section 5 contains concluding remarks and suggestions for future research.

¹ “From Pandemic to Infodemic”: speech of Vice President Věra Jourová on countering disinformation amid COVID-19.

2. BACKGROUND LITERATURE ON CONSPIRACY THEORY AND MIS/DISINFORMATION

Mis-/dis-information, conspiracy theories, fake news and false claims² have been the object of much research in various fields, including psychology (Swami *et al.* 2016; Douglas *et al.* 2017), sociology (Grimes 2016), history (Grauman 1987), and linguistics (Klein *et al.* 2019). Owing to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the virus of mis-/dis-information, or *Infodemic*, to use a term coined by David Rothkopf in 2003, refers to “an overabundance of information, both online and offline. It includes deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong information to undermine the public health response and advance alternative agendas of groups or individuals” (WHO 2020c).

According to Kott *et al.* (2016), people are biased by their ideological stances in their selection of information, as well as in their perception of a message: e.g. people with a more conservative ideology tend to be more sensitive to fear and threats and, consequently, are easier to manipulate.

Feelings of fear and anxiety tend to increase distrust towards political and health institutions and authorities, often triggering reactions of racial and social discrimination, social riots and skepticism (Freckelton 2020). Sentiments of unrest and intolerance are enhanced through social platforms, even if, oftentimes, Twitter and Facebook might be used by institutions and governments to promote campaigns against mis-/dis-information (Alam *et al.* 2020; Wicke *et al.* 2020).

Shahi *et al.* 2021 and Ceron *et al.* 2021 urge the need to investigate the identity of Twitter accounts responsible for the spreading of misinformation, by employing fact-checking and sound scientific methods, such as the epidemiological model, whereby misinformation is measurable with the reproduction number R_0 (Cinelli *et al.* 2020), or, the broadcasting model, whereby information is propagated directly from one source to a large number of individuals, as in re-tweets (Vosoughi *et al.* 2020).

Wood *et al.* (2012) and Douglas *et al.* (2017) have investigated the psychological factors that favour the spread of conspiracy theories.

² For the sake of brevity, we will employ these terms and expressions as synonyms, although a semantic distinction would be useful (Karlova and Lee 2011; Jiang and Wilson 2018; Tandoc Jr. 2019). Some authors (Ceron *et al.* 2021; Shahi *et al.* 2021) distinguish between misinformation, i.e. information which is accidentally false, and disinformation, i.e. information which is deliberately false. Somehow, this distinction is related respectively to Grice's notions of violation and flouting of maxims.

Adherence to conspiracy theories may be connected to the low levels of education and critical-thinking capacities of individuals, low social status, ethnicity or income of individuals, or even group identity and political ideologies (Uscinski and Parent 2014).

Kim and Kim (2020) find that the origins of conspiracy theories about COVID-19, in the Korean context, can be ascribed to political and psychological factors, namely authoritarian forms of government, anxiety, blame attribution and health status after recovery from COVID-19.

Recent studies have focused on the linguistic devices used in social media, which contribute to making people vulnerable to the misinformation spread by politicians, e.g. the use of swear words (Tiang and Wilson 2018), metonymy (Stephens 2020), storytelling (Tennent and Grattan 2022) and narratives in mainstream vs independent media (Mancosu and Vegetti 2020).

Two recent volumes are Birchall and Knight's (2023) and Butter and Knight's (2023), which provide an exhaustive account of conspiracy theories in the time of COVID-19; the authors examine the nature and origins of the conspiracy theories as they emerged in various countries and their impact on the social, political and economic contexts.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Grice's Cooperative Maxims: flouting and violation strategies

In *Logic and Conversation* (1975), Grice distinguishes between *saying* and *implicating*. *Saying* implies the conventional meaning of the utterances. But, in saying words speakers also *implicate*, i.e. suggest, imply, something else which goes beyond what is said. *Implicature* represents the pragmatic aspect of the utterance.

Implicatures can be *conventional* or *conversational* (aka *non-conventional*). Conversational implicature depends on the contexts or situation in which it is uttered, i.e. it depends on *discourse*. In order for conversational implicatures to work, speakers must observe the Cooperative Principle (CP). This consists of four maxims and submaxims: the maxim of Quantity, the maxim of Quality, the maxim of Relevance and the maxim of Manner. The category of Quantity refers to the quantity of information to be provided to let communication work; it implies two submaxims: "be informative" and "do not provide more information than is

required since over-informativeness may be confusing and mislead hearers from the core of a communication”. The rationale of the maxim of Quality is truth, whereby speakers are required not to say what they believe to be false or that for which they lack adequate evidence. According to the maxim of Relevance, speakers are required to be relevant, consistent with the subject of the topic of the information. The maxim of Manner is concerned with *how* what is said is to be said rather than *what* is said. The maxim consists of different submaxims, mainly requiring speakers to be perspicuous, but also to avoid obscurity and ambiguity as well as to be brief and orderly. Maxims are *violated* when participants deliberately manipulate them in order to deceive, gull or mislead their hearers; they are *flouted* when participants intentionally fail to fulfil a maxim, i.e. they use implicature, in order to persuade their interlocutors about some hidden meaning behind what is said. In other words, *flouting* implies violation of the maxims in a blatant way; in this case, the hearer is well aware of the fact that the speaker is violating the maxim(s) on purpose and with a specific intention on mind; the hearer understands the implied meaning of the speaker’s utterance. In violation, by contrast, hearers do not know that the speaker is lying or making false claims; they assume that the speaker is speaking true, they take the speaker’s words at face value, therefore they are deceived or misled.

Grice’s theory has found manifold applications in the field of communication studies. Hongmei (2014), for instance, adopts Grice’s CP to investigate negative news and fake news reports. Likewise, Gupta *et al.* (2013) exploit Grice’s CP and conversational implicature to develop their own approach to analyze verbal deception. This consists of various strategies whereby a speaker (S) wants the hearer come or continue to believe that something is true, although the speaker knows it is false; or the speaker wants to stop the hearer or prevent her/him from believing something that the speaker believes is true.

Although these approaches provide valuable insights into the application of pragmatics to the investigation of the language of deception, they cast no light on how fake news or conspiracy theories are linguistically instantiated at the textual level.

A significant contribution in this regard comes from Kleinke (2010) who proposes the adoption of a Cognitive Linguistics perspective to Grice’s conversational maxims. Her approach underlies the methodology adopted in the present research.

3.2. Kleinke's cognitive approach

In her paper (2010), Kleinke shows how, in communicative interactions, a speaker uses the morphological, syntactic, and lexical structures, to observe or infringe the cooperative maxims.

In particular, she draws on the crucial notion of *construal* in Cognitive Linguistics, i.e. “the way a speaker chooses to ‘package’ and ‘present’ a conceptual representation” (Evans and Green 2006, 467) to evoke meanings in the mind of the hearer. Different construals are achieved in language by differentially focusing on a specific aspect of any given scene (focal adjustment) and by variously “organizing different linguistic expressions or different grammatical constructions to describe that scene” (Evans and Green 2006, 536).

Levels of categorization, metaphor and metonymy, encyclopedic background knowledge, frames and event types, windowing of attention and selection of domains are only some of the cognitive principles and patterns adopted by Kleinke (2010) to describe how the speaker directs the hearer's attention towards the entities that participate in a particular scene, thus adhering to or deviating from the maxims. In other words, the instantiation of these cognitive principles causes the flouting or violation of a given maxim.

The maxim of Quantity is associated with the levels of categorization and abstraction and specificity. The levels of categorization include (a) basic-level categories; (b) superordinates; and (c) subordinates. The maxim is observed if basic-level categories are used as they comply with the principle of cognitive economy, i.e. the largest, efficient amount of information is provided with the least effort. It is flouted or violated if subordinates or superordinates are used, as they provide too much or too little information respectively.

The maxim of Quality is related to three areas of Cognitive Linguistics: encyclopedic background knowledge, frames and scenarios; metaphorical reasoning; metonymic reasoning.

The Maxim of Quality is observed if the speaker and the hearer share the same *frames*. It is flouted or violated if speakers and hearers do not share the same background knowledge, i.e. if the speaker deviates from the hearer's frame-based expectations, contradicts the hearer's knowledge, or uses hyperboles.

The Maxim of Quality is also flouted if the speaker uses fresh and/or non-conventional metaphors and metonymies. Non-conventional metaphors and metonymies are generally used when the speaker wants

to achieve a rhetorical or social communicative effect, such as persuading their audience.

The Maxim of Relevance is flouted if the Speaker (1) structures event frames asymmetrically; (2) uses distinct or distant or unexpected domains; or, (3) adopts asymmetrical windowing of attention, i.e. the speaker switches from one topic to another topic that belongs to an utterly different domain of the speaker's encyclopedic knowledge; or the speaker involves interactions between elements that do not provide coherence or organization to the scene, or the speaker gets the hearer to focus his or her attention onto some entities rather than others that are involved in a particular scene.

The Maxim of Manner can be flouted or violated when the speaker adopts unconventional metonymic reasoning. Peripheral domains and unexpected profiling entail forms of unanticipated shifting, at the semantic and grammar level respectively. In both cases, an utterance can be construed in one way rather than another by foregrounding lexical and grammatical elements while backgrounding others.

4. RESULTS

Taking the cue from Kleinke's paper, we will explore how conspiracy beliefs and fake news about coronavirus are linguistically constructed in Tweets, Facebook posts and other communication settings. We assume that (a) flouting or violation occurs as the speaker's cognitive concepts deviate from their conventionalized representation, and (b) conspiracy theories are the result of the speaker's flouting or violation of the Maxims. To demonstrate these assumptions, we investigate the use of fresh metaphors, non-conventional metonymies, dis-preferred windowing of attention and unexpected constructional profiling that speakers employ in order to build mis-/disinformation about the pandemic.

The analysis is carried out on a selective sample of passages taken from three sets of data.

The first set consists of about 100 articles collected by querying the platforms of some fact-checking organizations, namely Poynter³ and FactCheck⁴. The second set of data is represented by a Do-It-Yourself

³ <https://www.poynter.org/>.

⁴ <https://factcheck.afp.com/>.

(DIY) corpus consisting of 8.8K tweets and 2K Facebook posts released between January and July 2020. The tweets were collected using the Twitter Advanced Search option, typing #ChinaVirus# and setting the time span in the relevant spaces. The Facebook posts were gathered on the basis of the information obtained from the Tweets. Both the tweets and the Facebook posts were analyzed using Wordsmith Tools V.7. The third set of data includes a corpus of the speeches, remarks and tweets (1,100 texts) released by the former President Trump between January and July 2020, as well as tweets (7.4K) and Facebook posts (2.6K) released in the same period by public voices who endorsed conspiracy theories about the spread of COVID-19.

4.1. Case study 1: *The China virus conspiracy theory*

One of the main conspiracy theories that spread in the early months of the pandemic claimed that the coronavirus had been released from a laboratory in the city of Wuhan, China. The study of the “China virus” conspiracy theory was carried out on the second and third set of data. The corpus of tweets and Facebook posts shows a variety of derogatory, xenophobic and stigmatizing expressions, such as “China virus” or “Wuhan virus”, or “China Outbreak Virus Identified in 2019”, “China Originated Virus In December 2019”, or “Wuhan Health Organization”, instead of the real, official extended expression Corona Virus Disease 2019 (World Health Organization – WHO), which started going viral in social media, as well as in speeches, press releases, and remarks of politicians, scientists and doctors.

This case study shows how Trump pushed conspiracies about China’s accountability for the spread of COVID-19. We use a corpus of his speeches and tweets collected from factba.se and from presidential remarks retrieved from WhiteHouse.gov and, through the analysis of cognitive principles, we demonstrate how the former US President flouts or violates the four Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relevance and Manner.

In his press conference held on March 19, 2020 (see *Text 1*), Trump refers to Coronavirus with the general noun “virus” or with the expression “Chinese virus”.

Text 1

Thank you all for being here. And we continue our relentless effort to defeat the Chinese virus. Before I begin, I want to start by announcing that today we are bringing home another American citizen. It was a big thing. Very big.

From a cognitive perspective, he uses a basic level category, premodified by the epithet “Chinese”, thus adhering, from a pragmatic point of view to the Maxim of Quantity as he gives “enough, but not too much information” (Kleinke 2010, 3352).

The speeches (*Tab. 1*), by contrast, offer significant examples of how Trump flouts the four Maxims at a blow, testifying to the fact that the four Maxims are mutually dependent on one another (Grice 1989). All the Maxims are flouted because of Trump’s use of “China virus” and the co-textual pattern in which the expression occurs.

First of all, he flouts the maxim of Quantity through subordinate categorization (Kleinke 2010). By using *China* as a premodifier of *virus*, he employs the subordinate category at the cognitive level since *China* functions as a *classifier*⁵ of *virus*, thus distinguishing it from other categories of virus.

Table 1

We call it the “ China virus ”. We call it the “invisible enemy”. We call it many different names. It’s got many different names, ...
... because of the coronavirus or the China virus , whatever you want to call it. Now we’re up to 21 different names.
Nobody’s blaming me for the fact that the – call it whatever you want, the China virus , as you know there’s 20 names for it. You have your pick of names, right? I call it – [Yes.] – generally the China virus . Came out of China.
... or the China virus , the China plague – call it whatever you want; got a lot of different names.
There’s 15 different names. There’s 22 different names for this thing. I like best “ China virus ” because it’s the most accurate.
... it’s the China virus , not the coronavirus. Corona sounds like a place in Italy, a beautiful place. It’s corona. No, it’s the China virus .
You know how many names? We have like 22 different names. I call it the China virus.

He also flouts the maxim of Quantity as he makes unspecific reference to the quantity parameter or domain in his instantiation of the schematic reference to “virus names”. This lack of specificity can be inferred from the fact that the “number of names” for the virus constantly changes across his speeches, remarks and tweets. Unspecificity and abstraction are also cognitively conveyed by the intentional vagueness in the linguistic

⁵ To put this in terms of Systemic Functional Grammar, we might say that “Chinese” functions as epithet, whereas “China” functions as classifier thus bestowing an ideological meaning to the expression.

expression “call it whatever you want / whatever you want to call it” and the general noun “thing” that he uses to refer to the virus.

Secondly, using the term “China virus” Trump flouts the Maxim of Quality as he uses unconventional frames that are inconsistent, in terms of agents, causes, results, quantities, with his audience’s encyclopedic background knowledge. In the expression “China virus” or “China plague”, the word *China* is inappropriately used as a metonymy: *China*, which works as the vehicle entity, is unconventionally employed to identify the *virus*, which works as the target vehicle.

Thirdly, Trump’s flouting of the Maxim of Relevance is testified by his switching of topic to an utterly different area of the encyclopedic background knowledge or his distancing from the topic he is sharing with his hearers. This occurs through asymmetrical windowing of attention, which affects the attentional system in Trump’s speeches (see *Texts 2* and *3*):

Text 2

I can call it the “plague.” I call it the “China plague.” A lot of different names. But we always call it the “invisible enemy.” But the invisible enemy has been very tough on Mexico, and we have areas along the border where we’re in great shape because right there, because of that, that we’re in great shape. (Remarks: Donald Trump Discusses the Border Wall in Alamo, Texas - January 12, 2021)

Text 3

[...] That’s another. I mean, think of it. That’s never been done before. And while foreign nations are in a free fall, and you see that. And we don’t want that, but you see **what’s going on is COVID or the China virus or the China plague, there’s about 21 different names.** We’re creating the world’s greatest economic powerhouse, and next year will be one of the greatest years, maybe the best year that we’ve ever had, based on what’s happening [...]. (Speech: Donald Trump Holds a Campaign Rally in Montoursville, Pennsylvania - October 31, 2020)

Once again, the crucial role is played by the pattern consisting of “China virus” and “different names”, which help Trump deviate his hearers’ attention from the main topic of his speeches: the Border Wall in *Text 2* and the American economy in *Text 3*.

Text 4 is another example of how Trump flouts the maxim of Relevance through the issue of “China virus” as he deviates from the main topic. The unexpected, positive connotation of the term “corona”, which Trump willfully associates with Italian beauties, as opposed to “China”

which, by contrast, he uses to categorize the “virus”, determines a dispreferred windowing of attention in the encyclopedic framework knowledge of his hearers. In fact, not only is the Maxim of Relevance flouted but the Maxim of Manner is also violated, as the shifting of the topic is enhanced by syntactic discontinuity: he interrupts his argumentation about social, health or political issues, to foreground the “China virus” topic out of the blue.

Text 4

We built the greatest economy in the history of the world and right now, we’re doing it again. You know it’s – I see all these hats, make America great again. And now I’m going to say this, make America great again, again. Make America great again, again. We saved 1.4 million jobs in Pennsylvania alone.

And to fight the China virus, it’s the China virus, not the coronavirus. Corona sounds like a place in Italy, a beautiful place, it’s corona. No, it’s the China virus. They don’t want to say it. You know the radical left, they don’t want to say it. Do you ever notice they’re always going after Russia? Look, nobody’s, been tougher on Russia than me, but they say, Russia, Russia, Russia. (Speech: Donald Trump Holds a Campaign Rally in Moon Township, Pennsylvania - September 22, 2020)

4.2. *Case study 2: The “microchips” conspiracy theory*

In this section, we will see how the “microchips” conspiracy theory is linguistically constructed. According to this conspiracy theory, Bill Gates was plotting to use COVID-19 testing and future vaccines to track people with microchips. The case study is carried out on the second corpus of tweets and Facebook posts and on data obtained from the querying of the fact-checking organizations.

The first set of tweets belongs to Emerald Robinson, White House correspondent for the conservative website Newsmax. The tweets date back to April, 6 to 8 2020. The analysis of cognitive principles shows how Robinson violates all the Maxims, with the exception of the Maxim of Manner, thus building false claims about Bill Gates.

In *Text 6* below, she violates the Maxim of Quantity by achieving a high degree of specificity in all her tweets. For example, in her instantiation of the schema “nanotechnology”, notwithstanding Twitter’s 280-character limit, Robinson provides a huge amount of details to elaborate the schematic meaning of nanotechnology: she introduces a subor-

dinate category, i.e. “quantum dot-tattoo”, providing the parameters of SHAPE, POSITION, MANNER OF ARRANGEMENT, and ORIGIN.

Text 6

Most people are not aware such nanotechnology exists. What’s a quantum dot-tattoo? It’s a tag that comes with your vaccine shot. It embeds “just under the skin, where they become something like a bar-code tattoo.” It’s invisible & tracked by smartphone. (Tweet, April 6, 2020)

Robison repeatedly tweets about Gates with reference to another debunked conspiracy theory, Event 201, an exercise jointly run by The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, World Economic Forum, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which “simulated a series of dramatic, scenario-based facilitated discussions, confronting difficult, true-to-life dilemmas associated with response to a hypothetical, but scientifically plausible, pandemic” (www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201).

In *Text 7*, using rhetorical questions, Robinson flouts the maxim of Manner as she eludes the regular question-answer adjacency pair (Schlegoff and Sacks 1973) implied by Tweets, whereby speaker A produces a question and speaker B responds to this question. In this case, not only does speaker A, i.e. Robinson, produce the initial (rhetorical) question but she also provides the answer, which conveys the intended implicature, thus precluding retweets from anyone.

Text 7

The more you study this virus, the more you find the same name: Bill Gates. He’s the 2nd largest funder of WHO. He’s building 7 vaccine labs. Fauci. Tedros. Event 201. ID2020. He basically controls global health policy. What’s the plan? Using vaccines to track people. (April 6, 2020)

Bill Gates is very interested in one area of medicine: vaccines. Why? Because govts can mandate that people get them. And if vaccines include microchips then you have worldwide surveillance. (April 6, 2020)

The maxim of Quality is generally violated or flouted through violation of frames. The microchip conspiracy theory, for example, is often constructed by representing an unconventional schematization of experience at the conceptual level, thus violating or flouting the maxim of Quality through violation of frames. Knowledge is structured by associating elements and entities with unusual scenes, situations or events from human experience. Linguistically, conspiracy frames include attributes and relations between attributes belonging to different, asymmetrical domains.

One asymmetrical frame, which contributes to violating the maxim of Quality, is represented by the use of the expression “Bill Gates microchips” or “Bill Gates’ microchips” in tweets and Facebook posts (see *Texts 8* and *9*):

Text 8

They secretly planting **bill gates micro chips** in the body through the nose [...].

Text 9

There’s no pandemic! What we’re really doing is implanting **Bill Gates’ microchip**. The Gates Foundation is paying \$25k per implanted chip, [...].

Moreover, the analysis of the corpus of tweets and Facebook posts demonstrates the close relatedness that exists among different conspiracy theories, as if they were parts of a single plot devised by higher orders of power. For examples, the microchip conspiracy theory intertwines with the 5G conspiracy theory (see *Texts 10* and *11*):

Text 10

It claims that “people like Bill Gates” plan to secretly inject microchips during vaccination, allowing 5G mobile phone owners to make calls, transfer money and travel internationally without passports. It warns the microchips can “read your mind” and could be used to control people.

Text 11

With a 5G phone!you don’t need to move around with your Phone, You just keep it at home. But a MicroChip will be implanted under your skin!
[sic]

4.3. *Case study 3: The “5G” conspiracy theory*

As the vast majority of the 5G-based false claims have been removed from social platforms, we use the documents stored by the fact-checking organization Fact Check (factcheck.afp.com) to analyze how the cognitive processes that cause flouting or violation of the maxims construct this conspiracy theory. Fact Check allows users to read Tweets, Facebook posts, and Instagrams from public and private conspiratorial voices.

The case of 5G testifies to how viral and poisonous a false claim can become in no time at all. On July 20, 2020, a paper entitled “5G Technology and Induction of Coronavirus in Skin Cells”, authored by a team of scientists from Italy, USA and Russia, was published in the

Text 15

What's more disturbing: that the NIH had a study on its official website claiming 5G creates coronaviruses, or the fact it was removed after becoming exposed?

or leave the questions unanswered (see *Texts 16 to 18*):

Text 16

They are saying that the Con V will peak in Australia in July [...] how do they know this? because July is when 5g will be fully rolled out and amped up here.

Text 17

5G millimeter waves can also send nanotechnology into the human body. So even if we don't want to be vaccinated... it doesn't look like we can't go anywhere to be safe! Maybe join the other Aliens living underground? Or plan out an action plan to take swift action. We are concerned now about the vaccine genetically modifying us... imagine what 5G nanotechnology can do?

Text 18

This is not science fiction anymore! It's already happening. Why do you think they were burning 5G towers in the UK?

As Kleinke (2010) remarks, unexpected profiling is a technique that is often used in Internet discussions where speakers tend to give too much information in order to be perceived as experts and knowledgeable.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The paper has approached the issue of conspiracy theory in the age of COVID-19 by adopting a methodology that combines Grice's Cooperative Principle and the framework of Cognitive Linguistics. Notably, we have investigated how false claims and fake news about the pandemics are created in social media by both public and private voices. By elaborating the four Maxims on the cognitive principles of unconventional metaphorical and metonymic reasoning, dispreferred windowing of attention, unexpected constructional profiling and rhetorical questions, it has been shown how speakers fuel prejudice, skepticism and myths about the virus by flouting or violating the maxims and, consequently, encourage the hearer to acquire their truth – or falsehood – about the origins of the pandemic. Specifically, flouting or violation of the maxims is instanti-

ated linguistically by providing more or less information than required, for example by using subordinates or superordinates to describe agents, event frames or schemas. This device tends to drive the hearers' focus of attention on unexpected topics that belong to domains unrelated to or distant from the referent domain in question. False information is also the result of the speakers' use of unconventional metaphorical or metonymical expressions and unexpected organization of syntax, in order to achieve specific rhetorical effects. Often, these devices do not work in isolation but coexist in one single act. Our future work will aim at identifying forms of collaboration with other areas of research, besides Pragmatics and Cognitive Linguistics, which may help to hone our approach to debunk conspiracy theories.

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Internet Usage, YouTube, and Conspiracy-Mindedness in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation poses substantial threats to democracy around the world. In the United States, entrenched political polarization is both a consequence and a ramification of the spread of biased and false information. Much of this misinformation is spread online, especially on social media. Of all the social media networks in existence, the video-sharing platform YouTube is the most significant incubator of right-wing conspiracist thinking. To what extent has internet usage affected conspiracy-mindedness in the U.S. during the Trump era? I analyze data from five waves of the Pew Research Center's "American Trends Panel" to test the hypotheses that (1) being perpetually online, (2) keeping many social media accounts, and (3) relying on YouTube for news will increase perceptions of 'fake news', stoke conspiracist thinking, and help make democracy's status in the U.S. ever more precarious. Findings indicate that reliance on YouTube for news is an especially powerful predictor of noticing fake news about COVID-19 and the 2020 U.S. presidential election; attitudes about voter fraud, Donald Trump's challenges to the election results, and the January 6, 2021, insurrectionists; and deciding to stop talking to someone because of politics.

Keywords: conspiracy; COVID-19; Donald Trump; fake news; January 6 insurrection; misinformation; politics; United States; YouTube; 2020 U.S. presidential election.

a new era of American political life” (Enders and Smallpage 2018, 298; see also Bergmann 2018; Hellinger 2019). Through his willingness to dispute objective facts, Trump made conspiracist thinking much more mainstream (Tollefson 2021). The earliest days of Trump’s administration were marked by his refusal to accept the empirical reality that fewer people had attended his inauguration than had attended those of his immediate predecessor, Barack Obama. Indeed, scholars have documented a strong connection in general among right-wing authoritarianism, anti-democratic impulses, populism, and conspiracism (Bergmann 2018; Allington, Buarque, and Flores 2021). Like any clever political entrepreneur, Trump makes use of “post-truth politics” because it serves his right-wing populist style, and thus his political ends (Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017; Atkinson and DeWitt 2018; Bergmann 2018; Enders and Smallpage 2018; Hellinger 2019).

This article explores this confluence of circumstances through analysis of data from the Pew Research Center’s “American Trends Panel” surveys. How might social media usage shape conspiracist attitudes about COVID-19 and recent U.S. electoral politics? To what extent does reliance on YouTube (in particular) predict these threads of conspiracist thinking? What effects might social media usage have on the basic building blocks of democracy in the U.S.?

2. BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Conspiracy theories are “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more [...] actors. [...] perceived as powerful and malevolent” (Douglas *et al.* 2019, 4; see also Bergmann 2018). They put democracy at risk by threatening the media, expert knowledge, and the viability and legitimacy of the party system (Muirhead *et al.* 2020; Demata, Zorzi, and Zottola 2022). With underlying intergroup conflict and feelings of marginalization as preconditions of their existence (Enders and Smallpage 2018; van Prooijen and Douglas 2018), conspiracy theories allow politicians – particularly populists and those who are out of power – alter dominant narratives (Atkinson and DeWitt 2018; Bergmann 2018).

At least half the U.S. public believes at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver and Wood 2014), whether it is that John F. Kennedy was murdered by the CIA (Enders and Smallpage 2018), that the September

11, 2001, attacks were an ‘inside job’ (Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel 2007), or something else. Conspiracism has infiltrated Americans’ thinking about elections as well. Many embraced fake news before the 2016 election (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), and the post-election events of January 6, 2021, were driven rather directly by alt-right conspiracy theories (Bleakley 2021).

Previous studies document a confluence of psychological, political, and social factors that lead people to engage in conspiracist thinking (e.g., Bergmann 2018; Douglas *et al.* 2019). First, believing conspiracy theories is closely associated with one’s personal outlook on life and various psychological orientations. Two basic predispositions – seeing life in terms of good versus evil and assuming unseen forces compel events in the world – increase the likelihood of accepting conspiracy theories (Oliver and Wood 2014); these predispositions are also present among many who prefer populist politics (Bergmann 2018). So do feelings of anomie, low self-esteem, powerlessness, skepticism, and mistrust (Uscinski and Parent 2014; Enders and Smallpage 2018; Douglas *et al.* 2019; Allington, Buarque, and Flores 2021). This is so because conspiracy theories tend to appeal to emotions rather than cognitions, especially concerning feelings of ingroup superiority, marginalization, and threat (Dastgeer and Thapaliya 2022). When people feel existential stress, “conspiracy theories appear to provide broad, internally consistent explanations that allow people to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradiction” (Douglas *et al.* 2019, 7).

There are also myriad political reasons why people might embrace conspiratorial thinking. Several scholars have concluded that the tendency to believe in conspiracies is an alternative political belief system akin to ideology, and that believing in one or another conspiracy is a rough equivalent of fandom (Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014; Enders and Smallpage 2018). Although conspiracist thinking is not a direct result of conservatism per se (Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014), ideological extremists, especially those on the right, appear more likely to believe conspiracy theories and to consume fake news (van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet 2015; Hellinger 2019; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2020). These tendencies are attributed to the aforementioned ‘good vs. evil’, ingroup-centric cognitive style that mitigates existential fears (van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet 2015), as well as the desire to see things in ways that benefit one’s own ideological ingroup (e.g., Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016). In addition to ideology, partisanship – especially when it is an intense and highly prioritized identity – has significant ramifications on the likelihood that people will

embrace conspiracist thinking (Enders and Smallpage 2018; Druckman *et al.* 2021). Like strong ideologues, committed partisans naturally have an interest in discrediting groups they perceive as their opponents. Thus, they are more likely than moderates are to support conspiracy theories, particularly those that make their political opponents look bad (Uscinski and Parent 2014; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016; Enders and Smallpage 2018). For instance, the Pew Research Center found that in the U.S., Republicans were especially likely to believe conspiracist ideas heading into the 2020 election (Mitchell *et al.* 2020).

Various social factors have also been shown to predispose conspiracist thinking. In short, people who live in poverty, members of Generation X, ethnic minorities, men, and those with lower educational attainment are more likely to believe conspiracy theories (Uscinski and Parent 2014; Douglas *et al.* 2019; Druckman *et al.* 2021). The role of education appears to be especially salient in this regard. One explanation for this relationship is that increased knowledge and understanding of objective news reduces the tendency to endorse conspiracy theories (Craft, Ashley, and Maksl 2017).

Believing conspiracy theories has important ramifications for individuals and society alike. Exposure to conspiracy theories has been shown to heighten personal feelings of anger (Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo 1995) and disgust (Albertson and Guiler 2020). Conspiracist thinking also depresses interpersonal trust (Douglas *et al.* 2019), trust in authorities and democratic institutions (Jolley and Douglas 2014a; Albertson and Guiler 2020), political participation (Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo 1995; Jolley and Douglas 2014b; Douglas *et al.* 2019), willingness to vaccinate one's children (Jolley and Douglas 2014a), acceptance of other public health advice (e.g., Allington *et al.* 2021), and efforts to lessen one's carbon footprint (Jolley and Douglas 2014b).

Who spreads conspiracy theories? Enders and Smallpage (2018) contend that unusual events typically give rise to conspiracist explanations propagated primarily by elites. That said, the internet has created many polarized online communities (e.g., Douglas *et al.* 2019), and absent social media, today's virulent spread of conspiracy theories would be impossible (Dastgeer and Thapaliya 2022; Demata, Zorzi, and Zottola 2022). Social media influencers who make money by sharing political content have driven the spread of conspiracy theories and their preconditions, such as mistrust of elites and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Although there is an ongoing debate about whether social media networks are agents of political radicalization (e.g., Munger and Phil-

lips 2022), it is indisputable that ISIS recruited jihadists on social media, especially YouTube (Awan 2017). ISIS leaders knew that “tweeting, posting, ‘liking’, and sharing affirm identification with others who accept ... compromised reality” (Muirhead *et al.* 2020, 143). More broadly, people consume online content, including news, that comports with their existing political views (Sunstein 2018; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2020). When those views are extreme or rooted in distrust of political elites, conspiracist rabbit holes often beckon. Relatedly, people who assume that mainstream media spread fake news end up more likely to consume it on social media (Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017; Bleakley 2021).

YouTube is one of the most significant incubators of conspiracist thinking and misinformation in existence. The video-sharing platform is more influential in this regard than other social media networks are (Byford 2011; Allington, Buarque, and Flores 2021). YouTube has a vast and ever-expanding audience of over 2 billion monthly users (Hosseinmardi *et al.* 2021); the Pew Research Center reports that in the U.S., it has more users than any other social networking site (Perrin and Anderson 2019). YouTube’s allure is that it is visual, easy to access, permits extensive individual choice, and allows people to access information in a way that is easier than reading. It is also distinctive because of its algorithm-generated recommendations for further viewing (Munger and Phillips 2022). These algorithms can quickly lead users to unreliable purveyors of information (Hosseinmardi *et al.* 2021). Moreover, the fact that user comments are sorted by popularity on YouTube serves to build community among fans of conspiracy theories (Allington and Joshi 2020).

YouTube’s significance in U.S. politics grew rapidly after its founding in 2005, and it has been especially popular among conservatives since its inception (Munger and Phillips 2022). According to Lewis (2020), content creators who have political agendas vary in their tone, type of content, and specific ideology, but tend strongly to reject both progressive politics and whatever the mainstream media reports. As but one instance in which this bias directly affected human lives, people who relied on YouTube for news about COVID-19 were especially likely to believe conspiracy theories about it (Allington *et al.* 2021), which is unsurprising given that a quarter of YouTube videos about COVID-19 contained false or misleading information during the early days of the pandemic (Li *et al.* 2020).

People who spend time on YouTube often do so to obtain news. A quarter of Americans go to YouTube for news, and a large majority of that group (72 percent) say it is an important way they obtain news

(Stocking *et al.* 2020). Most of the news consumed on YouTube comes from mainstream sources (Hosseinmardi *et al.* 2021). However, almost half (42 percent) of all YouTube news channels are not affiliated with any news organization – and these independent channels are more likely than the mainstream news channels on YouTube to traffic in conspiracy theories and misinformation (Stocking *et al.* 2020). Systematic tension exists between many of these independent news creators and mainstream news sources. “YouTubers create content that serves as both a critique of mainstream news media and an alternative to it. Many express a desire to ultimately replace young audiences’ consumption of mainstream news” (Lewis 2020, 204). In addition, one study finds that frequent YouTube users tend to have low ‘news literacy’ (Munger and Phillips 2022), which makes them more susceptible to believing false information.

In the analysis that follows, I use data from five waves of the Pew Research Center’s “American Trends Panel” surveys (2019-2021) to test three hypotheses about how aspects of internet and social media usage might propel perception and acceptance of misinformation and conspiracy theories, as well as one ominous consequence of doing so, in the United States. More specifically, I hypothesize that:

1. Being perpetually online increases perceptions of fake news and conspiracist thinking and has deleterious effects for democracy.
2. Using a multitude of social media networks increases perceptions of fake news and conspiracist thinking and has deleterious effects for democracy.
3. Relying on YouTube for news increases perceptions of fake news and conspiracist thinking and has deleterious effects for democracy.

I analyze perceptions of fake news about COVID-19 and the 2020 presidential election; conspiracy-influenced attitudes about voter fraud, Trump’s challenge of the 2020 election results, and the appropriateness of apprehending the January 6, 2021, insurrectionists; and having stopped talking to someone due to politics. All six of these matters arguably undermine democracy, but the most concerning one is the last one, as it points directly to increased political polarization (e.g., Putnam 2000).

3. DATA AND METHOD

In its large-N “American Trends Panel” (ATP) survey, the Pew Research Center has included batteries of questions that allow me to test my

hypotheses directly. These questions concern (1) conspiracy- and misinformation-rooted attitudes about COVID-19, the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and the January 6, 2021, insurrection; and (2) use of social media: which outlets, how often, and for what purposes. One entire wave of the ATP survey (January 2020) is about respondents' use of YouTube. In the analyses that follow, I make use of a merged dataset of 15,085 cases from five waves of these ATP surveys conducted between November 2019 and March 2021.

I model six dichotomous dependent variables using logistic regression with robust standard errors. The first of these variables is a measure of perceiving fake news about COVID-19: affirmation of the statement "I have seen a lot of news and information about the coronavirus outbreak that seemed completely made up". The next three dependent variables concern perceptions of fake news and implicit endorsements of conspiracism around the 2020 presidential election:

- Affirming the statement "I have seen a lot of news and information about the 2020 presidential election that seemed completely made up".
- Affirming the statement "The Trump campaign should continue legal challenges to the [2020] voting and ballot counting process".
- Affirming the statement "Allegations of voter fraud in [the 2020] presidential election have been getting too little attention".

The fifth dependent variable deals with the January 6, 2021, insurrection, specifically, holding an attitude other than "very important" about the importance of finding and prosecuting "those who broke into the U.S. Capitol on January 6". Finally, I model a potential political ramification of the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories in the U.S., namely "I have stopped talking to someone due to politics".

These models emphasize the effects of three core independent variables gauging different aspects of social media usage. The first of these variables measures volume of internet usage: affirming the statement "I am online almost constantly". The second variable is a count of social media networks used, from among Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, LinkedIn, Reddit, Tumblr, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Twitch. The third variable is an indicator of "regularly" consuming news on YouTube.

I control for gender (using an indicator variable for male), race/ethnicity (using an indicator variable for white, non-Hispanic), education (using an indicator variable for having a four-year college degree), income (measured in three tiers), marital status (using an indicator variable for married), region of residence (using an indicator variable for South), and

polarized political orientations (using indicator variables for conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats as compared to moderates).

Tables 1-6 present three analyses of each dependent variable, testing each of the three social media independent variables one at a time. (Shaded columns signify that the independent variable was not significant in the model in question.) Each table displays odds ratios for the independent variables and controls that obtain statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level. Odds ratios greater than 1 indicate that a one-unit increase in that predictor variable *increases* the value of the dependent variable. Odds ratios less than 1 mean that a one-unit increase in the predictor variable *decreases* the value of the dependent variable. We may also interpret odds ratios as percentages to make the results easier to understand, using the following formula: $(\text{odds ratio} - 1) \times 100 = \text{the percentage by which a one-unit increase in the predictor variable increases or decreases the value of the dependent variable, holding all else equal}$.

4. RESULTS

Table 1 presents three models of the first dependent variable: affirmation of the statement “I see a lot of fake news about COVID-19”. As reported in the Appendix, 14.3 percent of Pew’s sample gave this response – a relatively small share, but from a sample of more than 10,000. Each column presents a test of the hypotheses posited above one at a time.

All three of the social media independent variables are significant predictors of perceiving fake news about COVID-19, so we may accept all three hypotheses in this context. Being online constantly (H1) increases the odds of perceiving fake news by 79 percent; each additional social media platform used (H2) increases the odds by 8 percent; and using YouTube for news (H3) increases the odds by 40 percent. Most of the control variables do not obtain significance in these models, but a few exceptions stand out. Men are 57-65 percent more likely to perceive fake news about COVID-19 in all three models, as are conservative Republicans in the first two models (33 percent and 42 percent more likely, respectively). The findings regarding gender are surprising, as men have been shown to be less skeptical about COVID-19 and more willing to accept the vaccine (Troiano and Nardi 2021). Perhaps men have been more likely to perceive fake news about the virus, but also more likely to reject it. The stronger tendency of Republicans to perceive fake news is

not unexpected. The pandemic was politicized in the U.S. from the very start, with Republicans being much more skeptical about the seriousness of the virus and the importance of being vaccinated (Halpern 2020; Troiano and Nardi 2021). Meanwhile, having a college degree reduces the odds of seeing fake news in the second model by 21 percent, suggesting that higher educational attainment buffers against potential negative effects of using many different social media networks.

Table 1. – “I see a lot of fake news about COVID-19”.

	ONLINE ALMOST CONSTANTLY	NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS USED	USE YOUTUBE REGULARLY FOR NEWS
Online almost constantly	1.79***	—	—
Number of social media networks used	—	1.08*	—
Use YouTube regularly for news	—	—	1.40*
Male	1.57***	1.65***	1.62***
White, non-Hispanic	ns	ns	ns
College degree	ns	.79*	ns
Income (three tiers)	ns	ns	ns
Married	ns	ns	ns
South	ns	ns	ns
Conservative Republican	1.42*	1.33*	ns
Liberal Democrat	ns	ns	ns
Number of cases	7,940	7,359	5,741
Log pseudolikelihood	-2861.30	-2785.23	-2207.43
Pseudo R ²	.02	.02	.02
AIC	5742.60	5590.46	4434.86

Note: Logistic regression with robust standard errors, reporting odds ratios.

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ ns $p > .05$

Data source: Pew Research Center, American Trends Panel (November 2019 - March 2021).

Because all three independent variables are statistically significant, we may directly compare the models to determine which one is the best fit for the data. Because the control variables are the same across all three models, we can reach a conclusion about which of the internet usage variables is the best predictor of perceiving fake news about COVID-19. To reach this conclusion, we compare the values of the Akaike Informa-

The Appendix indicates that more than twice as many of Pew’s respondents (29.9 percent) gave this response compared to those who saw a lot of fake news about COVID-19. Again, each column of *Table 2* tests the three hypotheses one at a time, but this time two of the hypotheses must be rejected in the context of seeing fake election news. Neither of the first two independent variables (being online constantly and number of social media accounts) is significant in their respective models, which is why the corresponding columns in the table are shaded. Thus, we reject H1 and H2 in the context of perceiving fake election news.

On the other hand, relying on YouTube for news increases the odds of perceiving fake election news by 42 percent. Being male also increases the odds (by 24 percent), as does being white (by 43 percent), having an incrementally higher income (21 percent), and being a conservative Republican as opposed to a political moderate (75 percent). This confluence of results reflects previous studies that report YouTube’s overall right-wing slant (Lewis 2020; Munger and Phillips 2022). Noticing fake news and believing it are, of course, two different matters. That said, we may straightforwardly accept H3: using YouTube for news predicts perceptions of fake news about the 2020 election.

Table 3 presents the results of analyses of the assertion “More attention should be paid to voter fraud”, while *Table 4* does the same for the belief that “Trump should continue to challenge the [2020] election results”². From as early as the 2016 primary election season, Donald Trump portrayed himself as the victim of systematic fraud (Cottrell, Herron, and Westwood 2018). He later claimed that he, not Hillary Clinton, had won the 2016 popular vote, and that the 2018 midterm elections were ‘rigged’. In 2020, he repeated the mantra that fraud would mar his reelection bid: “the only way we’re going to lose this election is if the election is rigged” (Axelrod 2022). When Joe Biden defeated him, Trump refused to accept the results of the election and tried a variety of (legal and extralegal) tactics to nullify them. His campaign contracted multiple studies of its election fraud assertions, but no evidence was discovered (Dawsey 2023). Perhaps because a substantial share of Trump’s supporters believed his false claims (Pennycook and Rand 2021), he pressed on, filing scores of lawsuits and perhaps profiting financially from these efforts (Haberman, Feuer, and Swan 2023).

² As shown in the Appendix, 27.8 percent of the Pew sample said: “more attention should be paid to voter fraud”, while 35.1 percent said, “Trump should continue to challenge the election results”.

Table 3. – “More attention should be paid to voter fraud”.

	ONLINE ALMOST CONSTANTLY	NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS USED	USE YOUTUBE REGULARLY FOR NEWS
Online almost constantly	ns	—	—
Number of social media networks used	—	ns	—
Use YouTube regularly for news	—	—	1.43*
Male			ns
White, non-Hispanic			1.43*
College degree			1.46*
Income (three tiers)			ns
Married			ns
South			ns
Conservative Republican			8.41***
Liberal Democrat			.12***
Number of cases			5,819
Log pseudolikelihood			-2302.38
Pseudo R ²			.29

Note: Logistic regression with robust standard errors, reporting odds ratios.

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ ns $p > .05$

Data source: Pew Research Center, American Trends Panel (November 2019 - March 2021).

The findings in *Tables 3* and *4* reflect those in *Table 2*: the first two internet usage variables are not significant, so we must reject H1 and H2 in both contexts, while relying on YouTube for news is significant in both cases. In fact, relying on YouTube for news increases the odds of both believing that election fraud should be investigated, and that Trump should continue to challenge the election results, by the same factor: 43 percent. It is especially noteworthy that reliance on YouTube is significant in both models considering that strong partisanship is such a powerful predictor of both dependent variables. Being a conservative Republican increases the odds of wishing for fraud investigation by 741 percent and hoping Trump will continue his challenges by an extraordinary 1303 percent. Likewise, being a liberal Democrat reduces the odds of each belief by 88 percent in each instance. The findings regarding partisanship are hardly surprising considering that the questions at stake directly concern the results of an election. However, being white also

far-right anti-government groups including the Oath Keepers, the Proud Boys, and the Three Percenters (Select January 6th Committee 2023). Their protest plan gathered much of its steam on social media, linked in part to the virulent QAnon conspiracy theory (Lee *et al.* 2022). While many Americans reacted in strongly negative terms to the insurrection, the Pew Research Center found that almost half (49 percent) of Republicans said Trump bore no responsibility for the violence (Gramlich 2022). Moreover, Pew’s polling showed that between March and September 2021, Republicans grew less eager to see the rioters found by law enforcement and prosecuted for their crimes (Gramlich 2022).

Table 5. – “It is not very important to apprehend the January 6 insurrectionists”.

	ONLINE ALMOST CONSTANTLY	NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS USED	USE YOUTUBE REGULARLY FOR NEWS
Online almost constantly	ns	—	—
Number of social media networks used	—	1.12***	—
Use YouTube regularly for news	—	—	1.73***
Male		1.22*	ns
White, non-Hispanic		1.34*	ns
College degree		1.36*	1.32*
Income (three tiers)		.81**	ns
Married		ns	ns
South		ns	ns
Conservative Republican		2.97***	2.80***
Liberal Democrat		.32***	.31***
Number of cases		7,587	5,920
Log pseudolikelihood		-3828.33	-2950.64
Pseudo R ²		.11	.12
AIC		7676.66	5921.28

Note: Logistic regression with robust standard errors, reporting odds ratios.

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ ns $p > .05$

Data source: Pew Research Center, American Trends Panel (November 2019 - March 2021).

To an extent, the results shown in Table 5 mirror those in the previous three tables. The first independent variable (being online constantly) fails to attain significance in its model, so H1 is again rejected. Number

of social media accounts and relying on YouTube for news, however, are significant predictors in their models, so H2 and H3 receive additional support. As the Appendix shows, 24 percent of Pew’s sample gave a response other than “very important” when asked how important it was “that federal law enforcement agencies find and prosecute those who broke into and rioted at the U.S. Capitol” on January 6, 2021. An incremental increase in the number of social media networks used results in a 12 percent increase in the odds of disagreeing that it is “very important” to apprehend the insurrectionists, while regularly using YouTube for news increases the odds by 73 percent. In both models, and consistent with Pew’s own reporting (Gramlich 2022), being a conservative Republican dramatically increases the odds of downplaying the importance of arresting the rioters (by 180 percent and 197 percent, respectively), while being a liberal Democrat dramatically decreases the odds (by 68 percent and 69 percent, respectively). The fact that two of the three internet usage variables significantly predict attitudes about apprehending the January 6 insurrectionists despite the presence of these strong controls for partisanship speaks clearly to the important role of social media in shaping these views. This conclusion reflects recent research about how candidates’ statements on the campaign trail are reflected in social media hashtags (Lee *et al.* 2022).

Because two of the models in *Table 5* contain significant independent variables, we may compare the values of the AIC statistic for each model to determine which one fits the data better. The AIC value corresponding to the third model is smaller in value, so we may conclude that regular news consumption on YouTube is a stronger predictor of attitudes toward the January 6 rioters than is the number of social media networks used. In short, *Table 5* provides additional evidence of the validity of H3. Getting news from YouTube inclines people toward perceptions of conspiracism in a variety of guises.

Finally, *Table 6* turns the focus to a consequence of conspiracist thinking: the exacerbation of political polarization. Since the late twentieth century, the U.S. public has become extremely polarized along ideological lines. Many Americans occupy one of two political camps that espouse incompatible values, consume different media (online and otherwise), and even have noticeably different quotidian preferences (Mason 2018; Iyengar *et al.* 2019). Even when they are in basic agreement about public policy priorities, strong adherents of both parties tend to harbor affective biases against one another (Webster and Abramowitz 2017) and prefer to avoid interpersonal contact (Frimer, Skitka, and Motyl 2017).

The distrust between these two camps has intensified into such strong affective distaste that some scholars are studying dehumanization in the context of political polarization (Mason 2018; Moore-Berg *et al.* 2020). It should therefore come as no surprise when people of opposing partisan identities decide not to speak to each other any longer. Moreover, recent research has shown that consumers of online news are especially polarized, and that the relationship between online news consumption and affective partisan polarization is strongest in the United States (Fletcher, Cornia, and Nielsen 2019).

Table 6. – “I have stopped talking to someone due to politics”.

	ONLINE ALMOST CONSTANTLY	NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS USED	USE YOUTUBE REGULARLY FOR NEWS
Online almost constantly	1.20*	—	—
Number of social media networks used	—	1.07**	—
Use YouTube regularly for news	—	—	1.29*
Male	.82**	.81**	.69***
White, non-Hispanic	1.62***	1.66***	1.67***
College degree	.81*	.79*	ns
Income (three tiers)	1.33***	1.28***	1.42***
Married	ns	ns	ns
South	ns	ns	ns
Conservative Republican	ns	ns	ns
Liberal Democrat	2.32***	2.25***	2.33***
Number of cases	8,993	7,544	5,890
Log pseudolikelihood	-5386.12	-4547.47	-3487.71
Pseudo R ²	.05	.05	.05
AIC	10,792.24	9114.94	6995.42

Note: Logistic regression reporting odds ratios, robust standard errors.

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ ns $p > .05$

Data source: Pew Research Center, American Trends Panel (November 2019 - March 2021).

The results shown in *Table 6* reveal that all three internet usage variables are significant predictors of having stopped talking to someone because of politics. Being online constantly increases the odds by 20 percent, while an incremental increase in social media networks used increases the

odds by 7 percent. Using YouTube regularly for news produces the largest increase in odds of the three models (29 percent). Four of the control variables are also significant across all three models. Men are slightly less likely to have stopped talking to someone due to politics, while white people, wealthier people, and (above all) liberal Democrats are more likely to have done so. As in several of the analyses above, it is noteworthy that the internet usage variables are significant even in the face of the predictive strength of the controls, especially partisanship.

All three hypotheses are supported by the results reported in *Table 6*. We can conclude that all three dimensions of internet usage have potentially deleterious effects on democracy in the U.S. because they reduce people's willingness to engage with one another. Democracy requires meaningful, respectful interpersonal communication (Putnam 2000; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Sunstein 2018), but that is in short supply today. The AIC statistics in *Table 6* also allow us to conclude that relying on YouTube for news has the strongest influence among the three independent variables on cutting off communication on account of politics.

5. CONCLUSION

Democracy is vulnerable around the world in no small part because of the spread of misinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories. People opt into information bubbles, often online, that reinforce preexisting points of view and exacerbate negative affect toward outgroups. In the United States, strong partisans on one side of the two-party divide often view strong partisans on the other side as an outgroup worthy of scorn and distrust. Meanwhile, social media networks have transformed the way people communicate and receive news. The internet's endless supply of information (and misinformation) is impossible for anyone to digest, so many people rely on social media friends and internet 'micro-celebrities' (Lewis 2020) to filter it for them. This tendency is not new; 'opinion leaders' have always shaped social groups' political views (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Rather than talking to people face-to-face, today's political opinion leaders post videos and links on social media that draw attention to information – or misinformation, fake news, or conspiracy theories – that their 'followers' might otherwise have missed (Bergström and Belfrage 2018). Donald Trump's recent domination of U.S. politics

has served to normalize belief in false information, at least in some quarters. Trump’s own constant presence on social media has been an important basis of his core of support (Ott and Dickinson 2019).

The results of the analyses presented in this paper show that online activity has potent effects on perceiving fake news, accepting aspects of conspiracy thinking, and cutting off communication with others because of politics. Being online constantly and belonging to many social media networks are significant predictors in only a few instances. However, reliance on YouTube for news is significant in every one of my models, confirming other scholars’ conclusions about the video-sharing network’s rightward tilt and its hospitable environment for conspiracism (Allington and Joshi 2020; Lewis 2020; Li *et al.* 2020; Allington, Buarque, and Flores 2021; Hosseinmardi *et al.* 2021; Munger and Phillips 2022).

In December 2020, YouTube brought a new policy into force that prohibited video content that questioned the integrity of Joe Biden’s election to the presidency. However, in June 2023, this policy was eliminated due to free speech concerns, meaning that YouTube content creators are now free to disseminate false claims of election fraud (Fischer 2023). This policy change brought YouTube into line with other social media networks – and may have been hastened by competition from Rumble, a misinformation-ridden YouTube competitor that is popular on the right (Peters 2022). Social media, of course, are not universally harmful; far from it. However, as Sunstein notes, though they “often have nothing at all to do with politics or democracy [...] they might create niches, and niches produce fragmentation” (2018, 22). A fragmented society is one in which democracy has difficulty thriving. There is a natural human tendency to seek out others who affirm our most closely held identities. When that process occurs to the extreme, as it can online, public discourse – genuine deliberation – among heterogeneous points of view becomes difficult at best. To quote Sunstein again, “Modern technologies and social media are dramatically increasing people’s ability to hear echoes of their own voices and wall themselves off from others” (2018, 56). For American democracy to survive in the long run, Americans will need to remove themselves from their echo chambers and rebuild trust across partisan lines rather than sinking ever deeper into the world of misinformation and conspiracism.

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“A Pandemic within the Pandemic”

A CDA of Social Media Comments on Domestic Violence during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Violence against women is a ubiquitous phenomenon, characterised by a series of psychological, physical, sexual, and persecutory acts that cause harm and suffering of various kinds to the victim. The issue, already declared a pandemic by the UN Secretary General in 2008, became a worrying pandemic within the pandemic with the outbreak of the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19 in the early 2020s. From the beginning, the media and specialised services spoke of a possible increased risk of adverse outcomes for the health and well-being of those already living in vulnerable situations before the onset of COVID-19. The threat was due to forced confinement (lockdown) and the difficulties for victims living with the abuser to report and turn to support services. A vital role in the rethinking and reorganisation of services and in the networking that has underpinned social work in the emergency period is represented by the use of technology and the modification of information flows that followed. A strong propensity emerges for the widespread use of digital tools, of the net in the widest sense, up to the use of social media, both to intercept beneficiaries and for the provision of services and their communication. The present study investigates user-generated discourse about domestic violence during COVID-19 by examining the replies to a Facebook post by the World Health Organization (WHO) (on 24 June 2021) reporting the increased risk for women during the pandemic. Critical Discourse Analysis represents a valid framework to investigate social media communication as expressing ideological meanings and sustaining hierarchically gendered social orders. In particular, the study seeks to identify the discursive means employed by online users to frame domestic abuse and express their position. It has also uncovered how the users exploit the topic to convey their views on other issues related to COVID-19 (e.g. vaccines, government policies).

Keywords: corpus-assisted discourse analysis; COVID-19; domestic violence; social media discourse; user generated content (UCG).

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a deeply rooted and pervasive problem that transcends borders, cultures, and social strata. It takes on various forms, including physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and cultural violence, and leaves behind a trail of suffering and harm. Among these forms, domestic violence, also referred to as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), stands out as a prevalent and distressing phenomenon that affects countless women worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported on June 24, 2021, the increased risks women face during the pandemic. Before delving into the discussion of violence against women during the lockdown, it is essential to clarify the terminology used in this essay. For the purposes of this work, we will primarily use the term “domestic violence” to refer to a range of abusive behaviours that occur within a domestic setting. While “intimate partner violence” is related and often used interchangeably, it specifically refers to abusive behaviours within intimate or romantic relationships. By adopting the definition of “domestic violence”, we intend to encompass a wider spectrum of relationships, to comprehensively address the diverse forms of violence against women within the home environment, as highlighted by the WHO. However, we acknowledge that the issue of violence against women during lockdowns may encompass both domestic violence and intimate partner violence and may extend to broader concerns related to gender-based violence and abuse (Capaldi *et al.* 2012). The choice of terminology is made here for the sake of clarity and relevance to the scope of this essay.

The United Nations *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* provides a comprehensive definition of violence against women.

The term violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. (Art. 1 *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, December 20, 1993)

Domestic violence refers explicitly to abuse in intimate partner relationships, often involving husbands, partners, boyfriends, or ex-boyfriends (Carnero *et al.* 2022).

Extensive research demonstrates that domestic violence is not an isolated occurrence but a worrying “constant” in women’s lives (Campbell *et al.* 2009). Sadly, the very individuals who should provide support and care – intimate partners – often become the perpetrators of violence against women. The consequences of domestic violence on the physical and mental health of abused women and girls are profound. The physical injuries resulting from physical violence can be debilitating, leading to chronic pain, disabilities, and even death. Furthermore, the emotional and psychological toll of abuse can scar victims for a lifetime, eroding their self-esteem, causing depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Norman *et al.* 2014; Jonker *et al.* 2019) and impeding their ability to trust others. Additionally, the cycle of violence often perpetuates economic hardship, as women may be forced to leave their jobs or lose economic independence due to their abusers’ control.

Given the staggering prevalence of domestic violence, a global response is necessary. The UN special rapporteur on violence against women, Rashida Manjoo (2012), identifies domestic violence as the most pervasive form of violence continuing to afflict women worldwide. Shockingly, most reported cases of violence against women involve domestic violence, where abuse occurs within pre-existing relationships (UNICEF 2006). While isolated incidents of sexual violence by strangers in public spaces cannot be discounted, it is within the confines of the home that women face their gravest danger.

2. COVID-19

The emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan province, China, in December 2019 led to a global health crisis that impacted the world in ways that are unprecedented in human history. The pandemic has been characterised by its extensive reach, intensity, and far-reaching consequences, as well as the diverse range of actions taken to combat it.

The outbreak triggered a complex and articulated response from local and international authorities, given the severity of the situation and the multiplicity of counteracting actions required to mitigate its devastating effects. Swift action and organisational capacity were crucial in several countries to fight, slow down and eventually reverse an otherwise catastrophic trend.

By the first months of 2020, the media and specialised services started to talk about a probable future increase in cases of violence

against women in the home because of the increased risk of violence due to forced confinement (lockdown) and the difficulties for victims living with the abuser to report and turn to support services (Graham-Harrison *et al.* 2020; Grierson 2020; Mittal 2020).

In particular, in numerous cases, women who were already unemployed, or lost their jobs due to the widespread closures resulting from the imposed restrictive measures, were more vulnerable to domestic violence, as they were forced to stay at home for extended periods. Consequently, their financial dependency on their abusive partners deepened, making it harder to escape the cycle of violence (Arenas-Arroyo *et al.* 2021; Usta *et al.* 2021).

The global pandemic thus gave rise to a distressing phenomenon that has been described as a “pandemic within a pandemic” (Evans *et al.* 2020)¹. Hidden from the majority, this silent crisis thrived behind the closed doors of homes that were supposed to provide shelter from external threats. As the world grappled with the pandemic outbreak, an alarming increase in violence against women occurred, albeit discreetly, during the initial lockdown.

It is ironic that the domestic sphere, typically a place of refuge and safety, can sometimes become a suffocating environment that exacerbates abusive behaviour by intimate partners. Unfortunately, many women have found themselves trapped in these seemingly safe confines, unable to escape higher levels of violence. This violence lies in the relational imbalance between the sexes and the desire for control and possession by the male gender over the female gender (Kaukinen 2020) – which cuts across all cultures, social classes, ethnicities, ages, education and income levels.

As society was experiencing an abrupt disruption, individuals were forced to rapidly reorganise their lives, attempting to navigate an unfamiliar landscape. Unfortunately, this reorganisation was accompanied by an excruciating decision for women in danger: to endure the fear of the virus or the anguish of violence.

¹ The phrase “a pandemic within a pandemic” has become increasingly recognised in the context of COVID-19 as a way to describe the hidden dangers that have arisen as a result of the pandemic. This term was initially coined by Stephen Lewis (2004), a UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, during a press conference at the 15th International AIDS Conference in Bangkok. It has since been adopted by Evans *et al.* (2020) as a means of articulating the consequences of COVID-19, and has gained widespread acceptance among those who have experienced its hazardous and often imperceptible effects. Notable individuals such as Natalia Kanem (executive director of the UN Population Fund) and Janice Underwood (Virginia’s chief diversity officer) have also embraced this definition.

The increase in the number of cases of gender-based violence worldwide due to the pandemic was clearly indicated by the survey published by the United Nations in July 2020, which called this phenomenon a “shadow pandemic” precisely to underline its devastating impact (Sri *et al.* 2021).

At an international and European level, recommendations and guidelines have been provided to deal with emergencies of violence (European Commission 2020; United Nations Women 2020; WHO 2020), which have emphasised the need to strengthen specialised support and hospitality services for women, both in terms of the number of facilities and working methods, first and foremost the possibility of operating remotely, and to facilitate access through widespread institutional communication and service guidance for victims.

The focus was also on the more crucial aspect of networking by the specialised and general services to cope with the particular criticality that cases of violence assume in a health emergency and on the need to provide adequate financial support to the services also to be able to operate safely.

Given the concerning data regarding domestic violence and its amplified prevalence during the pandemic, the World Health Organization not only provided recommendations to local governments, but also shared a post on their Facebook page on June 24th, 2021, which sparked numerous reactions (refer to section 5). In light of the significance of this issue, it was deemed important to explore how it was perceived by citizens.

3. INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In today’s digital age, social media has become a crucial instrument for public officials looking to interact with their constituents. Whether it is TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, or any other platform, the ability to connect with a diverse audience is unparalleled. Through social media, governments can promote their campaigns, raise awareness of key initiatives, and engage with the public in a way that was once impossible. As such in today’s world, social media has become an indispensable and powerful tool for governments to communicate with their citizens effectively. Likewise, international organisations also utilise these platforms to disseminate their initiatives across multiple domains to the general public.

In the healthcare sector, social media have been increasingly used by governmental and non-governmental institutions – such as politi-

cal authorities and experts – as a strategic tool to raise public awareness and disseminate health information (Gough *et al.* 2017). Social media platforms offer public health professionals numerous opportunities and benefits including disseminating knowledge to the public, combating false information, maintaining communication during emergencies, expanding the reach of current resources and recruitment initiatives, providing answers to frequently asked questions, and encouraging citizen participation.

This trend in the use of social media in healthcare reached unprecedented levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the importance of communicating reliable health messages to the community during public health emergencies (Lazarus *et al.* 2022) and necessitated the attempt to increase trust in scientific expertise (van Dijck and Alinejad 2020). At the same time, citizens' use of social media to obtain news and information related to COVID-19 was steadily increasing (Nielsen *et al.* 2020).

The participation of citizens in platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok during crises was thus crucial to the ability of governments and international organisations to understand citizens' concerns and priorities and how to reduce panic and anxiety (Chen *et al.* 2020).

Many studies (Moorhead *et al.* 2013; Huesch *et al.* 2016) have already shown that the use of social media can positively influence awareness of public health measures and prevention behaviours. It is therefore worth mentioning that communications of specific health and political actors were often directed at (or at least mentioned) target population groups, whose acceptance of the measures was deemed essential to achieve the desired political outcome (e.g. Martin *et al.* 2020).

4. USER GENERATED CONTENT (UGC)

In today's digital era, the Internet has facilitated a participatory culture where users actively generate and control communication through various online platforms (Rathore and Panwar 2016). User-generated content (UGC) refers to media content, such as text, images, videos, or comments, created and shared by users who are not professional producers. Social media has led to the spread of UGC, characterising it as a mass phenomenon (Prunesti 2013).

UGC has gained immense significance in the context of social media platforms, such as Facebook, which have become crucial channels for governments and institutions to engage with the public. Citizens actively participate in sharing opinions, experiences, and perspectives, thus transforming themselves from passive consumers into active contributors. This shift testifies to the evolving dynamics of public engagement in the digital era (Blanchard *et al.* 2008). Through their participation in online platforms, citizens now have the opportunity to voice their opinions and interact directly with governments and institutions. Citizen responses to posts are vital in enhancing public participation, promoting transparency, and holding authorities accountable (Stromer-Galley 2004). Such responses serve as a democratic check, facilitating dialogue and enabling policymakers to gain insight into public sentiment and concerns (Kwak *et al.* 2010; Gerodimos 2012). Through contributing to content generation, citizens actively shape and influence public narratives and policy dialogue, while promoting knowledge exchange amongst peers. This process empowers individuals with the information needed to make informed decisions (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013).

It is essential to note that UGC differs from traditional news media due to its raw and emotional nature and its ability to convey powerful messages through passionate storytelling (Sycora *et al.* 2022). By sharing personal experiences, citizens contribute to a diverse and inclusive discourse, bringing attention to marginalised voices and issues. The interactive nature of online platforms allows for dialogue, collaboration, and the formation of virtual communities centred around shared interests and concerns (Herring *et al.* 2005; 2015). The power of citizen responses lies in their ability to challenge dominant narratives and establish alternative discourses.

5. AIMS

On a global scale, the World Health Organization (WHO) was particularly active, creating dedicated pages on its website that featured stories, videos, information, and recommendations. The WHO also worked with other institutions, such as the European Union and FIFA, to launch campaigns against domestic violence.

On June 24, 2021, the WHO shared a brief yet informative post on their Facebook page highlighting the issue of domestic violence amid the lockdown (*Fig. 1*).



Figure 1. – WHO post June 24, 2021.

Like numerous other social media posts, the communication shared by the WHO aimed to encourage public involvement and feedback. However, the comments received on the post revealed some unexpected and worrying realities related to the topic.

The present study aims at investigating user-generated discourse about domestic violence during COVID-19. It focuses on the discursive means employed by online users to frame domestic abuse and express their position. It also wishes to uncover whether the users exploit the topic to convey their views on other issues related to COVID-19 (e.g. vaccines, government policies).

6. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This investigation aims to scrutinise a dataset of user-generated online comments that were posted on the official WHO Facebook page. As of December 30th, 2021, the WHO post had garnered 5445 comments. However, for the purpose of analysis, comments that solely contained emoticons, one or two exclamation words (such as “Oh!”, “ewww”, “nope”, “preach”, “very true”), incomprehensible or out-of-context responses, or those that violated community guidelines were removed from the corpus. The resulting corpus consists of 3,557 comments collected between March 19, 2020 and December 30, 2020, containing a total of 76542 tokens and 16488 types. For the quantitative aspect, Ant-Conc corpus investigation software was used as a support to the analysis. Frequencies were utilised to identify trends within the dataset and served

as a starting point for qualitative analysis, in this case, discursive indicators of ideological discourses. This provided a quantitative element to the research.

Although the sample size in this analysis was relatively small, it provided valuable insights into the linguistic strategies employed by respondents to the WHO post expressing their opinions. To ensure the dependability of this research, various factors must be considered, including the suitability of the corpus in the broader context of the pandemic period and its relevance, given the authority of the organisation that published the post and the scale of the awareness-raising campaign during the specific period.

In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the discursive practices of citizens, all available responses were included as they were representative of the period under review. To effectively analyse this corpus, the principles of corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), as described by Partington and Marchi (2015, 217), were used. This approach uses corpus linguistic techniques to identify potentially relevant areas of text, which can then be qualitatively explored and tested for representativeness. The aim is to balance the rigour of numerical analysis and the detail of language, following the guidelines by Partington and Marchi (2015, 215).

In the realm of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Fairclough's three-part analytical model for CDA is used to analyse text, discourse practice, and social practice. This provides a qualitative element to research.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis provides a valuable lens to explore user-generated responses to domestic violence. This approach makes it possible to identify recurring themes, capture different perspectives and uncover explicit and implicit discourses within the corpus and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions surrounding domestic violence.

Cameron's "Feminism and linguistic theory" (2007) explores how language reinforces gendered ideologies. By examining the intersection between feminist theory and linguistic analysis, her work sheds light on how language is used to shape discourse on gendered issues, including domestic abuse against men. Cameron's insights reveal the complexities of gendered power dynamics in language use.

Before commencing the analysis, it is important to note that gender/sex information of the comment authors was not collected. This decision was made due to the inherent difficulty in ascertaining the true identities of individuals who engage in online discourse on social media platforms

such as Facebook. Although Facebook implements policies to encourage users to provide genuine information, these policies are not always stringently enforced, and some users may choose to remain anonymous or use pseudonyms (Adjei *et al.* 2020).

It is finally worth noting, especially in light of the topic under consideration in this study, that victims and survivors of online abuse – many of whom it is reasonable to imagine to be among those who responded to the WHO post – are particularly vulnerable to various risks. As such, pseudonymous or anonymous profiles often serve as a crucial means of safeguarding against the perils of monitoring, harassment, impersonation, and stalking (Dimond *et al.* 2011; Haimson *et al.* 2016).

7. ANALYSIS

After careful reading, the comments were grouped into 11 categories according to the interest expressed by the users and labelled accordingly (cf. Braun and Clarke 2006).

The *Table 1* below shows the results of the thematic grouping of user comments as well as tokens and types.

*Table 1. – List of thematic categories of user’s responses, tokens and types.
 Source: Author’s elaboration.*

CATEGORY	N. OF COMMENTS	TOKENS	TYPES
1. What about men	1389	33272	4985
2. Anti-WHO, government and lockdown	1289	24850	5170
3. Women need more help	294	8467	2200
4. No correlation between lockdown and domestic violence	101	3152	989
5. Pro lockdown	59	2081	810
6. What about children	54	1113	501
7. Practical solutions are needed	51	994	471
8. Sexist and racist comments	49	1156	593
9. Anti-China	36	680	342
10. The post was written too late	20	494	255
11. Domestic violence is related to alcohol and poverty	15	283	172
TOTAL	3357	76542	16488

Table 2 offers some examples for each identified category.

Table 2. – Examples from each identified category.

CATEGORY	EXAMPLE
1. What about men	And violence against men, when do we talk about it,? A taboo subject for too long!
2. Anti-WHO, government and lockdown	I am happy! All here is against WHO! Go people!
3. Women need more help	u r desperate for men. Lol dear I myself am a man. and it is fact that women suffer more than men in life.
4. No correlation between lockdown and domestic violence	LOts of people have found themselves in this situation and dont resort to domestic violence. an abuser is an abuser regardless.
5. Pro lockdown	We were in lock down for a reason OR didn't you know.
6. What about children	Do not forget the violence against children, which, in way worse, regardless of Gender.
7. Practical solutions are needed	Yes everyone knows this is the reality of many women and men, what about the solutions?
8. Sexist and racist comments	In case you haven't noticed, everything is about women and blacks. Ever get the feeling you're being played?
9. Anti-China	what about an ad calling out China...
10. The post was written too late	And it's only NOW that youre talking about it? Stfu.
11. Domestic violence is related to alcohol and poverty	Al Cap domestic violence is most of the time the cause of alcohol abuse.

The thorough analysis of the thematic breakdown (*Tab. 1*) offered, amongst others, an insightful and unpredictable result emerged. Surprisingly, the topic that gathered the most attention and generated the highest number of interactions was that of men who are victims of domestic violence.

In view of the outcomes derived from the categorisation of the responses generated by the users, it was considered appropriate to carry out a verification process to swiftly comprehend the linguistic landscape and the use of vocabulary. With the help of the Antconc software, a list of the most frequently occurring words in the entire corpus was obtained. The results (*Tab. 3*) show an evident prevalence of the word “men” (1181) over “women” (913), followed by “violence” (146) and “abuse” (354).

These results thus supported the thematic division of the answers that was reported above.

Table 3. – Most common words (number of hits) in the dataset.
 Source: *AntiConc* elaboration.

TYPE	RANK	FREQ	RANGE
men	4	1181	9
women	11	913	10
violence	14	746	10
against	27	445	9
people	31	395	11
abuse	36	354	10
covid	46	270	9
end	48	261	9
stop	50	254	10
abused	57	216	8
domestic	66	182	7
lockdowns	66	182	5
woman	66	182	9
children	76	165	8
man	79	151	8
victims	82	148	8
pandemic	91	132	9
abusers	96	127	5
gender	99	114	7
lockdown	99	114	6

7.1. *Violence and abuse*

The initial step in analysing the discourse strategies employed by the participants in the discussion is to focus on the predominant group of responses, which, given the results of the frequency list, regards men as the primary victims of domestic violence.

The WHO defines domestic violence, or rather Intimate partner violence, as the abusive behaviour of one or both partners in an intimate relationship, without any reference to gender:

Intimate partner violence refers to behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours. (WHO 2012, 1)

When discussing the topic of domestic violence, it is common to associate the victim as a woman and the perpetrator as a man. This perception is often reinforced by media outlets, which tend to highlight the one-sided nature of domestic violence. Attempts to raise awareness about the equally serious problem of violence against men are often disregarded. This is likely due to the evidence from various studies and surveys conducted globally, which consistently demonstrate that domestic abuse against women occurs twice as often as it does against men (Thureau 2015; Office for National Statistics UK 2019; Warburton Raniolo 2020; Fanslow *et al.* 2022).

With the support of the AntConc software, a search was conducted to investigate further and verify the use of one of the two key terms in the corpus, “violence*”, within the entire corpus, i.e. of all thematic groupings. The results returned a picture confirming what emerged from the thematic grouping and from an initial overview of the word list and WHO indications mentioned above. The term “violence”, which, as shown in the table above, appears with a rank of 14 and 746 occurrences, shows notable results in the following clusters: “violence against men” (151 times), “violence against women” (76 times), “violence against children” (7 times). These results, although quantitative, are valuable to confirm the orientation of the users’ answers and serve as a guide for further analysis.

It was therefore considered worthwhile to investigate the other of the two terms that refer to and are closely related to victims of domestic violence, namely “abuse”. Proceeding with the investigation of the term “abuse” used as a noun, it was observed that the most frequent collocations of the term “abuse”, among the most frequently used in the analysed corpus, are the following: “domestic abuse” (41), “mental abuse” (11), “physical abuse” (9), “emotional abuse” (5), “verbal abuse” (4).

Through the examination of prevalent collocations, it has become apparent that the discourse surrounding domestic violence is deeply impacted by power dynamics and social constructs. These factors shape how individuals perceive and understand the experiences of victims. In the following examples and all those quoted in this article, the author has used italics to highlight the words deemed worthy of attention; capitalisation, on the other hand, is reported in full from the posts.

- (1) Don't forget men can suffer *domestic* abuse just as much as woman.
- (2) This shouldn't say women, it should just be *domestic* abuse as a whole.
- (3) Oh now you care about the more *domestic* abuse people have been experiencing since covid.
- (4) how many would laugh at the *mental* abuse?
- (5) and what about the *mental* abuse of women against men?
- (6) It's not just about *physical* abuse, it's *verbal* and *mental* abuse too!
- (7) As a victim of systematic *emotional* abuse of 5 years before I sought to break free from it this could be worded a little differently to not exclude anyone.
- (8) men can be guilty of *physical* abuse, women guilty of *emotional* abuse.
- (9) The effect of a Woman's *verbal* abuse of her male partner will often be longer lasting than physical damage.

The expression “domestic abuse” is a dominant collocation within the discourse, drawing attention to the private sphere as the primary site of violence. This reinforces the notion that these issues are confined to the home and not openly discussed. Another significant example is “mental abuse”, which highlights the psychological manipulation employed by abusers. The collocations, such as “domestic abuse”, “mental abuse”, and “physical abuse”, transcend mere descriptive language; they function as discursive tools employed by users to not only label but also legitimise the issue at hand. These terms are deeply rooted in institutional and academic discourse, and by adopting them, users reinforce the gravity of domestic violence against women, framing it as a well-recognised and pervasive problem. It could be posited that this strategic use of terminology allows users to position themselves as advocates, signalling their commitment to addressing this critical societal concern. Consequently, these specific collocations serve as a linguistic mechanism through which users express a clear and unwavering stance in favour of tackling domestic violence against women, thereby fostering a discourse that promotes awareness, action, and social change. Furthermore, the collocations “physical abuse”, “verbal abuse”, and “emotional abuse” emphasise the forms of harm, whether visible or intangible (Eastal *et al.* 2012; Tsui *et al.* 2012). These collocations underscore the detrimental effects on victims' well-being and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of abuse. Collectively, aforementioned collocations provide insight into the multifaceted nature of domestic violence, resulting in a more nuanced and informed perspective on this critical issue.

7.2. “What about men?”: anger and resistance in user-generated responses

It is a common belief that men are unlikely to denounce being victims of domestic violence. Culturally considered to be the ‘stronger sex,’ men would have to deal with the shame they would feel in publicly admitting that they are subservient to their partners to such an extent that they consider themselves victims of their violence. Moreover, even if it were not a problem of social stigma (Goffman 2009), very often physical or psychological violence is not recognised as such, especially if it is established as a relational mode within the couple and family. Women, moreover, biologically have less physical strength than males. This is why it is considered highly unlikely that women are capable of committing physical violence against a man. Nevertheless, this is untrue: women scratch, bite, pull hair, and throw objects. Many of them carry out violent behaviour against their partners without fear of repercussions because they are perfectly aware that even if the man tries to report the incident, his testimony might be considered bizarre or, in any case, unreliable (Perry 2014).

Upon careful analysis of the largest group of user responses, it was significant to identify that the prevalent themes that emerge with striking clarity relate to deep frustration and are directed towards society’s and institutions’ convention of considering women as the only victims of violence. This is despite the global recognition (supported by extensive research and statistical data in section 1) that intimate partner violence is a gender issue that disproportionately affects women in terms of severity, patterns, intentions, and the genders of the victim and perpetrator. There is an urgent plea for assistance and intervention to counteract the deeply rooted stereotype of the male gender as the stronger sex, which impedes men from speaking out and seeking help. Additionally, the comments vehemently denounce the pervasive indifference and disregard towards those who display the courage to report the abuse they have endured (Tsang *et al.* 2020).

The analysis reveals a significant presence of anger in the user-generated responses (Breeze 2020), expressed through various means by male users. Expressions such as “stop”, “STOP THIS RIGHT NOW !!!!!” and “That is wrong labelling!” are expressions of anger which serve as direct commands and intensify the emotional tone of the discourse and conveying a sense of urgency and demand immediate action (Chan 2014).

- (10) The fact they’ve [WHO] stated it’s just women is what’s *wrong* with the world it happens to men aswell.

- (11) This is such a *wrong* approach! This shouldn't say women, it should just be domestic abuse as a whole. men are abused too. Shocked that the WHO would be so arrogant to that knowledge.
- (12) Happens to men just as much. *Wrong* no matter which way you look at it.
- (13) But why label it Covid-19 // Violence Against Women? That is *wrong* labeling! be more like Covid- 19 // Violence Against Spouses!!! Men get abused everyday too and even worse now since being suck at home with their abuser! *Stop* putting gender on spousal abuse!
- (14) *STOP THIS RIGHT NOW* !!!!!..... there is violence toward men and children too....any violence is *wrong*, so quit with singling out of men... you exacerbate the problem.....

The responses from users who support men exhibit a strong resistance against gendered narratives surrounding domestic violence. Specifically, phrases like “Stop putting gender on spousal abuse!” (13) highlight the rejection of gender-specific labels and the call for a more inclusive discourse. By challenging the gendered framing of domestic violence, these users aim to advocate for recognising male victims and question societal assumptions about gender roles and violence. This resistance is a form of empowerment and agency in the face of oppressive discourses.

The word “wrong” is repeatedly used as a heated expression to convey discontent, as seen in example (11) “This is such a wrong approach!”. This use of “wrong” challenges the notion of women as the sole victims of domestic violence and advocates for a more inclusive understanding that also recognises men as victims. Facebook users in this group thus use discursive tactics such as “wrong” and “stop” to contest dominant discourse, disrupt hierarchies of power, and assert alternative perspectives that emphasise the significance of acknowledging domestic abuse against men.

Swear expressions, such as offensive language or profanity, are also employed in some responses to intensify emotional reactions and assertively challenge dominant discourses. These expressions, though controversial, can function as a linguistic resource for individuals to convey strong emotions and disrupt established norms (Stapleton *et al.* 2022).

In the corpus, expressions such as “disgusting” and “Don't give me the bullshit about that only women get hurt” demonstrate the heightened emotional intensity facilitated by swear words.

- (15) You mean violence against anyone!!!! Enough with this woman *crap* more woman abuse men but men don't talk about it to anyone because we are meant to be these tough* ppl and if we talk we look *weak *so sick* of the woman *crap* what about us men!!

- (16) So *don't give me the bs* about that only women get hurt and need laws like men some have a sort of superpowers then talk about equality.... That's just *disgusting*.
- (17) What a *Disgustingly* biased ad.

However, it is essential to note that the use of swear words in online discourse can also have negative implications, such as contributing to a hostile and polarised communication environment (Arancibia and Montecino 2017). It is crucial to critically assess the impact of such language on the overall tone and effectiveness of the discourse, as well as its potential to marginalise certain voices further or perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

7.3. *Lockdown: frustration, anger, and fear*

Contrary to what emerged in the hard months of the pandemic from press and television reports of the heated controversy surrounding vaccines, the primary concern of the people who participated in this conversation shifted decisively to the consequences of forced isolation in terms of both abuse and psychological stress and mistrust of communication by the authorities, all exacerbated by lockdowns.

The comments retrieved showcase evident frustration, anger, and fear among users, which is reflected in the intense and emotionally charged language they employ. Expressions such as “stop”, “must stop”, “end”, and “must end” coupled with terms like “lockdown”, “fake”, “lying”, and “farce” are loaded with intensity, suggesting the users’ strong disapproval and condemnation of both domestic abuse and the restrictions imposed to combat the pandemic.

Specifically, the imperative form “stop” (250) and “must stop” (7) combined with “lockdown” suggests a demand for an immediate cessation of the lockdown measures. This framing positions the lockdown as the primary problem that needs to be addressed, emphasising its negative impact on various aspects of society. Other interesting examples include the expressions “end” (261), “must end” (76) and “lockdown” in combination with terms such as “false” (20), “lie” (13), “lying” (11) and “farce” (2).

- (18) *STOP WITH THE LOCKDOWNS* and isolation! You are the cause.
- (19) This [referring to lockdown] needs to *stop* at all times, covid is no excuse so stop giving the perpetrators one.
- (20) *Stop* the lockdowns and censoring of dissenting views.
- (21) We must end the *ISOLATION* a.k.a. *LOCKDOWN* for ever... The violence will never end in this type of society.

- (22) So you should stop this *fake* news abt Covid-19.
- (23) We must END *fake* pandemic. Stop violence from who.
- (24) We must end *fake* covid pandemic!
- (25) Stop with the lies and *crap* you peddle.
- (26) Covid is the organization not a virus its to control humanity and all this *fake* news stop lying the world!

The the examples above suggest scepticism and criticism towards the measures and the authorities' communication about the pandemic. The combination of these terms conveys a perception that the lockdown is ineffective and based on false information or hidden agendas. Users question the credibility and motives behind the measures, positioning them as a negative force.

It is worth noting the significant role that exclamations, modals, and imperatives play in conveying emotional intensity and stance on domestic abuse and lockdown measures in online discourse.

In Critical Discourse Analysis, exclamations convey urgency, demand attention, and emphasise the emotional charge associated with the issues being discussed. The use of exclamations such as “stop” (254 occurrences) and “end” (261) effectively captures the users' desire for immediate action and underscores the gravity of the situation. This linguistic strategy aligns with Fairclough's (2003) observation that exclamations function as alternatives to evaluative statements, allowing users to express their dissatisfaction and frustration more forcefully.

Moreover, the inclusion of exclamatory statements indicates an intention to engage the recipient and elicit a response (Napolitano 2018), which, in this context, implies active participation in online discourse. By using exclamations, users communicate their concerns about domestic abuse and lockdown measures and seek to create a sense of shared emotional experience and mobilise others to address these issues.

Notably, these exclamatory expressions reflect a diverse range of psychological attitudes (Byron and Heeman 1997), including anger and fear, which contribute significant additional meaning and convey the intensity of their sentiments. While these emotional elements do not alter the informative content of the users' utterances, they contribute significant additional meaning and convey the intensity of their sentiments.

7.4. Modal verbs: what needs to be done

The users' cry of protest is also expressed through the modals such as "must" (see examples 21, 23, 24) and "need to", used to assert a sense of obligation, necessity, or demand for action (Fairclough 1995) and which play a crucial role in user-generated responses retrieved for the corpus.

- (27) It's important for us to understand that men *need to* be taken into account as well.
- (28) Men and children *need to* be protected too.
- (29) ANTHONY FAUCI and BILL GATES *Need to* be JAILED and WHO Dissolved.
- (30) You all *need to* be on trial for terrorism and I hope soon.
- (31) People men or women *need to* stop looking for excuses to justify being violent to their partner.

By employing modal verbs, users express their expectations and position themselves as advocates for change. They suggest that specific actions are imperative to address the issues of domestic abuse and lockdown measures discussed in the corpus, positioning themselves as proactive and empowered agents seeking resolution.

The use of the modal "should" is equally significant as it can denote both a sense of obligation and desirability. It is important to note that the distinction between the two meanings can only be made by examining the context in which it appears.

- (32) This *should* be violence against people not just women.
- (33) There *should* be a gender equality.
- (34) Home *should* be safe.
- (35) WHO *should* stop COVID then and let people go out. WHO = Money making machine for Bill Gates and Pharmaceuticals.

According to Coates (1993, 59), the significance of "should" encompasses a broad range of implications, from providing subjective guidance to describing the correct objective procedure, all the way to conveying a strong sense of moral responsibilities and duties. In this corpus, it can be argued that "should" is utilised to convey a sense of obligation or duty that is characterised as being particularly "strong", similar to the type of messaging typically communicated by the modal "must".

7.5. *Capitalisation in user-generated content: Facebook responses*

The investigation of capitalisation in user-generated content, particularly in the context of Facebook responses, reveals intriguing aspects worthy of consideration. The following examples demonstrate how non-standard orthography, characterised by the use of capital letters for single words or phrases, is also used in the most vehement comments.

- (36) Domestic Violence AT A LOCATION!!!
- (37) Violence against BOTH men AND women needs to be abolished!
- (38) Well! There's a surprise. NOT.
- (39) The WHO makes the problems, points them out then expects others to clean up their mess. ANOTHER RUINED, ONCE GREAT ORGANISATION.
- (40) AND WHAT THE HECK DID THE WHO DO ABOUT IT??

Scholars have long debated the significance of non-standard orthography in written communication. The prevailing notion is that capital letters, when used extensively, are akin to “shouting” and convey a tone of anger, arrogance, and disrespect. However, recent studies conducted on Twitter shed light on alternative perspectives. It has been suggested that non-standard orthography, including capitalisation, can enhance the emotional impact of a message (Zappavigna 2012). In this view, writers employ capital letters and other unconventional orthographic features to encode prosody, effectively conveying the intended tone or emotion behind their words. Consequently, readers can decipher and interpret these linguistic cues to better grasp the writer’s intended meaning.

The function of non-standard orthography in user-generated responses on Facebook is multi-faceted. Not only does it challenge conventional norms of written language, but it also serves as a tool for users to amplify the emotional content of their messages. By deviating from standard orthographic conventions, users can imbue their words with a heightened sense of intensity, passion, or urgency. This linguistic strategy allows them to draw attention, express frustration, and evoke strong emotional responses from their audience.

Furthermore, capitalisation and non-standard orthography in Facebook responses may also reflect the social dynamics within online communities. It can signify solidarity among like-minded users and resistance against perceived injustices or dominant narratives. The deliberate choice to capitalise certain words or phrases can serve as a form of linguistic activism, emphasising the importance of specific issues and signalling a collective voice demanding change.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought about a widespread health crisis and unveiled a distressing phenomenon known as the “pandemic within a pandemic”. Behind closed doors, within the supposed sanctuaries of homes, a silent crisis of increased violence against women unfolded. The domestic sphere, intended to provide refuge, became a stifling environment that amplified the abusive behaviour of intimate partners. As society grappled with the rapid reorganisation of daily life, women faced an agonising choice between the fear of the virus and the torment of violence. International and European recommendations and guidelines were put forth to address this emergency, emphasising the need to strengthen specialised support services, facilitate remote access, promote institutional communication, and ensure adequate financial support.

In light of concerning statistics, the World Health Organization provided guidance to local authorities and shared a post on its Facebook page on June 24th, 2021, which garnered significant attention and sparked various unexpected and controversial responses.

In fact, contrary to what one would have expected, only a very small percentage of responses focused on support for the WHO post and women and agreement with the distancing rules adopted by governments worldwide.

For the majority of the responses, the post turned out to be a sounding board, a public square in which users adopt a most angry tone in criticising the post published by the WHO, the stereotypical idea that sees men as abusers because they belong to the ‘stronger sex’, and not abused, the lockdown measures that have turned the home into a place of danger and fear. Last but not least, the demand for change in actions to combat domestic abuse is always expressed with strength, often mixed with anger, as well as an end to the distancing measures that isolate abuse victims.

The analysis of user-generated responses within the Critical Discourse Analysis framework reveals the utilisation of various discursive strategies in addressing the issues of domestic abuse and lockdown measures.

By examining of user-generated responses within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis reveals the implementation of various discursive strategies when addressing issues related to domestic abuse and lockdown measures. Users employ a range of linguistic devices to convey urgency, demand swift action, and express their emotions. These devices encompass exclamations and modal verbs that emphasize necessity.

Furthermore, users frequently employ non-standard orthographic techniques, such as capitalization, to infuse additional layers of meaning and emotional impact into their responses. Capital letters, in particular, intensify the emotional content of their messages, effectively conveying a sense of passion and urgency. This unconventional orthographic feature enables users to express their frustrations, capture attention, and cultivate a sense of solidarity among like-minded individuals.

By analysing these strategies, we can gain deeper insights into the complexities of social issues, such as domestic abuse and the consequences of lockdown measures, and contribute to fostering critical awareness and facilitating meaningful societal transformations.

The results obtained proved to be most particularly thought-provoking. Indeed, citizens' responses to controversial awareness-raising messages provide supranational institutions with critical feedback, opportunities for engagement, insights into public concerns, potential for trust-building, and opportunities to promote active citizenship. These responses offer valuable learning opportunities, even in negative comments and can contribute to supranational institutions' effectiveness and legitimacy.

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A Corpus-Based CDA of Populist Politicians' Strategies and Public Response on Twitter during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyse how populist leaders in UK and Italy – namely Nigel Farage, Nicola Sturgeon, Giorgia Meloni, and Matteo Salvini – reacted to the first and second lockdowns on their Twitter accounts, communicating directly to their people. The analysis was carried out following a combined qualitative and quantitative approach to discourse. The qualitative analysis focused on comparing populist leaders' rhetorical and semiotic choices, while the quantitative analysis observed the response by the community of common Twitter users. This work aims on the one hand at unveiling the strategic use of social media by populist leaders and on the other at investigating conflictual interactional dynamics, especially in times of crisis.

Keywords: CADS; CDA; CL; communication; conflict; COVID-19; discourse; language; populism; Twitter.

1. INTRODUCTION

When dealing with the concept of populism, difficulties in finding a common definition of such phenomenon arise. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser argued that populism is “an essentially contested concept” (2017, 2), Hidalgo-Tenorio, Benítez-Castro and De Cesare considered it “a notoriously slippery phenomenon to examine” (2019, 7): these

two statements alone clearly show the halo of uncertainty, and the lively debate concerning the notion of populism. The complex nature of populism poses major challenges to academia, which struggles to reach an understanding that encompasses the nuances of this multifaceted and multidimensional phenomenon (Stavrakakis 2017): scholars defined populism as a political strategy (Weyland 2001), a discursive style (Kazin 1998), some prefer to talk about populist policies (Acemoglu *et al.* 2013), some even question its very existence (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Probably one of the most convincing and popular definitions is that proposed by Mudde (2004), who described populism as a thin-centred ideology, whose peculiarity is to be found in its porosity and adaptability (Ruzza and Fella 2009), as it absorbs elements from other ideologies such as socialism, nationalism or communism, depending on the context in which it emerges (Taggart 2000). As suggested by Hidalgo-Tenorio and Benitez-Castro, “there is little doubt that discourse is key to this phenomenon” (2021, 1), as the focal point of all populist movements is the (discursively created) tension between two factions represented by ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupted élite’. Within this dynamic, the populist leader sides with the first group and proposes him/herself as the representative of the *volonté générale* (Mudde 2004; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Populism can be further subcategorised in left and right populism, also referred to as inclusionary and exclusionary populism respectively. The major difference between these two labels lies in the identification of ‘the people’: while the latter is more concerned on the ethnonational characteristics of such group, the first one sees it from a socio-economic perspective, thus representing members of the working class exploited by the élite (Abt and Rummens 2007).

The COVID-19 global pandemic has been one of the most critical crises of the contemporary world, with serious health, economic, and social consequences (Lasco 2020; Giardiello 2021). This shocking and unexpected event has brought about a new relationship between governments and citizens especially within an individual freedom-collective health divide. The new needs imposed by the pandemic crisis led to the establishment of lockdowns (Faulkner 2021) that were legitimised according to different rhetorical strategies at different points in time and in different countries (Wodak 2021). Within this scenario populist leaders throughout the world exploited the health crisis in various ways (Bobba and Hubé 2021), either to legitimise their authoritarian rule (Arienzo *et al.* 2021) or to criticise existing restrictions as a threat to the Nation’s economy and autonomy.

ulism and the media is influenced by the popularisation and populism of politics. This means that politicians tend to employ a more popular language and to appeal to the people more frequently; while the media tend to become populist in the attempt to popularise politics blending information, entertainment, personalisation and spectacularisation (Bracciale and Martella 2017). On the one hand, populists can easily represent mainstream media as part of the elite. On the other, media can be used by populists as a vehicle (Krämer 2018) that nowadays seems to be essential in political communication. Specifically, social media play a crucial role in the communication strategies of all politicians (Ernst *et al.* 2017) in ordinary circumstances and even more so in times of social distancing. The strategic employment of social media is not a prerogative of populism; however, populists and social media seem to have an “elective affinity” (Gerbaudo 2018). Populism and social media have a peculiar relationship because these platforms allow populists to have a direct contact with the people, to create a close connection (or at least giving the illusion of it) with them without the intermediation of traditional media, and to have the opportunity to personalise their messages (Ernst *et al.* 2017). These aspects are crucial because in this way populist leaders are able to employ their strategies (e.g., appeal to the people) and to perform their role as man/woman of the people by directly conveying their self-representation (e.g., sharing pictures or saying something that portrays them while engaging in common everyday life activities) without any kind of traditional intermediation. Another crucial aspect in the relationship between populism and social media is the employment of these platforms as a “tool of opposition” (van Kessel and Castelein 2016). For instance, social media represent a platform through which the people can express their opposition against the traditional media (Gerbaudo 2018, 749). At the same time, for populist leaders social media, such as Twitter, represent a tool of opposition against the elites (van Kessel and Castelein 2016) and a platform that perfectly suits both institutional and informal discourses – characterised by a personalised and emotionalised style of communication (Blassnig *et al.* 2020) – in an unmediated way.

Starting from these premises, this work aims at: (a) unveiling the strategic use of social media by populist leaders in times of crisis, comparing the semiotic choices employed by these four populist leaders to investigate and highlight the existence of possible similarities and differences, and (b) exploring the way Twitter users respond to the different communicative styles and strategies adopted by each leader. For this reason, we decided to complement the qualitative analysis of the tweets produced

by the four politicians, presented in section 3, with a corpus assisted analysis of a much larger data set, presented in section 4 and consisting of Twitter users' responses to the analysed populists' tweets. The choice of two different data sets was made to provide an evidential base to support the theoretical proposal that there is a direct connection between the attitudes of populist politicians and Twitter users' responses. Section 5 is dedicated discussing the results of the two approaches and using them to provide some concluding remarks and introducing further research steps.

2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data were collected during the first week of the first lockdown and the first week of the second lockdown in Italy and in the United Kingdom¹. Concerning the qualitative analysis, we selected the tweets through the Twitter Advanced Search tool. *Table 1* shows that the UK leaders are less prolific than the Italian ones. For reasons of comparability, we collected all the tweets by Sturgeon and Farage, and selected only the 20 most replied to tweets per lockdown by Salvini and Meloni, selecting the ones that exhibited a higher number of comments.

Table 1. – Corpora building.

CORPUS	1ST LOCKDOWN	2ND LOCKDOWN	TOTAL TWEETS
Meloni	(59) 20	13	(72) 33
Salvini	(198) 20	(70) 20	(268) 40
Sturgeon	15	13	28
Farage	21	10	31

The data were qualitatively analysed through the Critical Discourse Analysis approach (Machin and Mayr 2012) paying particular attention to metaphors (Charteris-Black 2011), representational strategies (van Leeuwen 2008) and (de-)legitimation strategies (van Dijk 2008). After a thorough observation of all the retrieved tweets, we established 6 categories and 18 sub-categories (*Tab. 2*), based on the presence of the main analytical features. These interpretative categories helped us to identify similarities and differences among the four populist leaders.

¹ In Italy data were collected from 9 to 15 March and from 3 to 9 November 2020, in the UK corpora from 23 to 29 March and from 31 October to 6 November 2020.

Table 2. – Categories and sub-categories.

CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES
Lockdown	pro lockdown; against lockdown
Proposals	contribution; guidelines; bringing up
Positive in-group representation	<i>us</i> (party); <i>I</i> (populist leader); legitimation
Negative out-group representation	immigration; delegitimation; hate speech
Connection with the people	comfort; thanks; solidarity; auto-celebration
Rhetoric and style	hyperbole; sarcasm; emojis

First, we focused on politicians’ opinions regarding lockdown. Then we focused on politicians’ proposals during the selected timespan. These proposals can be contributions (ideas that the politicians suggested to the government about the management of the crisis), guidelines (rules delivered by politicians in order to contain the pandemic) or ‘bringing up’ comments (when politicians complain about the rejection of their proposals). We analysed politicians’ positive in-group representation, through pronoun use and legitimation strategies, and negative representations of out-group social actors, through delegitimation strategies, negative references to immigration, and the use of hate speech. The fifth category involves the strategies adopted to connect with the people; we looked at comfort (strategies to comfort people during this unexpected crisis), thanks (expressions of gratitude for respecting official guidelines), solidarity (expressing support to people and to some specific categories such as workers, doctors, nurses etc.), and auto-celebration (praising the people). Last, in the category of rhetoric and style we analysed strategic uses of hyperbole, sarcasm, and emojis.

As for the analysis of replies, we used a Python library (*twarc*) to download all the replies to all the tweets by the four politicians in the selected weeks. Given the high number of tweets published by Matteo Salvini, we downloaded replies to the tweets that had received at least one hundred replies; for the other politicians we downloaded all the replies to the tweets published in the two weeks. All collected replies were checked to delete duplicates and messages produced by bots, written in languages other than the one used by the politicians, and published more than six months after the original tweet. The resulting data set, including available metadata on author, date of publication, and metric, was converted to xml and uploaded to Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014) to make full use of annotation. *Table 3* summarises the size of the four corpora in terms of tweets and words. As it was easily predictable, given the high number of

tweets, Salvini's corpus of users' replies is the largest but we can see that, on average, UK politicians receive more replies: each tweet by Farage receives more than 1000 replies, Sturgeon's nearly 700, Salvini's tweets have slightly more than 400 replies, while Meloni's just a little over 250².

Table 3. – Corpus of replies.

Politician	1ST LOCKDOWN			2ND LOCKDOWN			TOTAL			
	Tweets	Replies	Words	Tweets	Replies	Words	Tweets	Replies	Words	Replies per tweet
Meloni	59	14892	322281	13	4238	96821	72	19130	419102	266
Salvini	98	45495	909423	48	17254	374456	146	62749	1283879	430
Farage	21	18727	454286	10	14498	306839	31	33225	761125	1072
Sturgeon	15	9230	220444	13	9614	233486	28	18844	453930	673

The purpose of the quantitative analysis of the replies is to identify how Twitter users evaluate, interact with, and respond to the politicians' strategic communicative style adopted to address the problems arising from the two lockdowns. We aim to provide empirical evidence to support our hypothesis that there is a direct connection between the attitudes expressed by populist politicians and Twitter users' responses.

To this aim, we compared the eight corpora, the four of the first lockdown and those from the second one, with the TenTen corpora (Jakubíček *et al.* 2013) available on Sketch Engine for Italian and English. The comparison helped us identify keywords (Kilgariff 2009) that characterised each corpus, highlighting major differences in frequency with the selected TenTen reference corpora. The comparison among the identified keywords, in turn, allowed us to identify differences in the way people responded to the tweets by the four politicians. The criteria for keyword selection³ resulted in lists ranging from 100 lemmas

² Differences in users' engagement between the two countries may be related to the overall number of Twitter users. According to an Italian AGCOM report of February 2021 Italy as 11.2 million Twitter users, while the UK has more than 16 million users according to a guide on Social Media Platforms and Demographics by the London School of Economics and Political Science.

³ For the keyword identification, we selected the .it and the .uk domains in the reference corpora, we computed keywords based on lemmas, due to the rich Italian grammatical

for the smallest subcorpus (Meloni - 2nd lockdown) to more than 500 lemmas for the 1st lockdown Salvini subcorpus, the largest one. Bearing in mind the categories adopted for the qualitative analysis of the politicians' tweets (*Tab. 2*), keywords were grouped in references to the pandemic, topics and references to national politics and policies, references to foreign affairs, expressions of praise/encouragement, expressions of (both aggressive and derisive) disagreement, and derogatory comments (swearing, insults, and slurs). The way the identified keywords were used in users' responses was investigated through manual reading of concordances, which helped the attribution to a keyword to one of the categories as well as identifying the loaded value of seemingly 'neutral' terms, as we will show with example in section 4.

3. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

For reasons of space, out of all the analysed tweets, we will present the analysis of just four tweets per politician, two tweets delivered during the first and two during the second week of lockdown, so that they can serve as illustrative and representative samples of the most common communicative strategies that emerged from the qualitative analysis.

3.1. *The Italian case*

During the first lockdown, Meloni and Salvini were extremely favourable to restrictions to contain the pandemic. For this reason, they were also critical towards the government that was cautious about the establishment of strict lockdown measures. In addition to their criticism towards the government and their proposal of a strict lockdown, both *Figures 1* and *2* show how Meloni and Salvini tried to give their contribution suggesting some healthcare and economic measures concerning the management of the emergency, somehow implying a lack of Government's commitment. The references to economic aids exhibit how these politicians

inflection, selected lemmas occurring at least 50 times in the focus corpora, added a value of $k = 10$ not to enhance keywords absent from the reference corpora, focused on keywords with a score of at least 2, meaning they occur at least twice as frequently in the focus corpus, and that were present in at least three threads.

express their solidarity with the people. This contributes to reinforcing their connection with the people, since they represent themselves as the only ones who care about people's needs, especially in this time of crisis.



Figure 1. – Meloni, G. (2020, March 10)⁴.



Figure 2. – Salvini, M. (2020, March 11a)⁵.

By comparison, Meloni's tweet is textually and visually more professional: her proposals are schematic and framed in blue and accompanied by the colours of the Italian flag, which are references to Italy and her party, with a direct reference to the colours of the party symbol, visible in the bottom left corner. During the analysis we noticed that blue is often employed by these Italian politicians to convey a more institutional tone

⁴ I will shortly meet Prime Minister Conte to discuss the #coronavirus emergency. Here are the main proposals I will make.

⁵ We will spend the night reading line by line the government decree. The right to life, health, work and compensation must be guaranteed immediately to ALL Italians, no one excluded. Clear answers are needed. Until tomorrow morning my Friends, I love you.



Figure 3. – Meloni, G. (2020, March 13)⁷.



Figure 4. – Salvini, M. (2020, March 13)⁸.

⁷ We are not just any Nation. We are a people of dreamers, of workers, of heroes. We are those who, when faced with adversity, have always known how to bring out the best in ourselves. Together we can do it, let's show everyone that WE ARE ITALY #CourageItaly

⁸ ITALY DOESN'T GIVE UP! We fought, we fell, we cried, we fought, we stood up and we WON. Together we can ❤️



Figure 5. – Meloni, G. (2020, November 3)⁹.



Figure 6. – Salvini, M. (2020, November 7)¹⁰.

⁹ The government's answer to desperate businesses and citizens? The #clickday for the discounted #kick scooter. While we are living in one of the worst crises in recent times, the government is squandering money to fatten up a few Chinese companies. These gentlemen live in another dimension.

¹⁰ Beware, if you say this you are a 'populist'.

During the second lockdown, the delegitimation (very often combined with their's and their parties' self-legitimation) towards the government and the EU is more and more present. *Figures 5* and *6* show how Meloni and Salvini criticise the government and their choices concerning the management of the pandemic, especially from an economic perspective. Both leaders criticise measures adopted by the Government, such as the kick scooter bonus, the school chairs on wheels, and, of course, immigration. Even though immigration is a favourite topic by both politicians, it is particularly pervasive in Salvini's discourse (he is the only one who talked about immigration also during the first lockdown). In addition, we should notice that the government's delegitimation is realised from a visual perspective through the choice of specific pictures of their political opponents rich in sarcasm. In *Figure 5* Meloni mocks the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, the Secretary of the Democratic party Nicola Zingaretti, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio with a photo-montage where the politicians are riding kick scooters. In *Figure 6* Danilo Toninelli (a Five Star Movement Senator) is riding a kick scooter; while Conte, Zingaretti and Di Maio seem to smile evilly. On the one hand, this choice is useful to Salvini in order to delegitimise the government and to reinforce the idea that these politicians promoted wrong economic measures willingly disregarding the people's interest and well-being. On the other, using a sarcastic tone, Salvini is able to legitimise himself by playing on the alleged negative connotation of the word populist in inverted commas (*Attenzione, se lo dite siete dei "populisti"*).

Meloni and Salvini changed their opinion concerning restrictive measures during the second lockdown, criticising them for damaging the Italian economy; restrictions were enacted by the Government, regardless of their proposals for a better management of the crisis. *Figures 7* and *8* show how the leaders delegitimise the government and criticise the lockdown contrasting immigrants and Italians. The aim is clearly to trigger anger towards the government's choices. According to these leaders, Italians are obliged to stay home, while immigrants can continuously disembark and move freely with the complicity and consent of the government. This narrative is supported visually (*Figs. 6, 7, and 8*) and textually through the representation of immigration as an ongoing invasion. For instance, Meloni explicitly says that the government *spalanca le porte all'immigrazione clandestina* describing metaphorically Italy as a home with wide-open, unguarded doors. She also highlights with the green colour the words *immigrants invade Sicily* that are part of the headline of the newspaper article attached in the picture. Meloni and Salvini also

employ the aggregation strategy (van Leeuwen 2008) – visually (*Fig. 7*) and textually in *Figure 8* (2.000 illegals) – that supports the sub-category *hyperbole*. Lastly, *Figure 8* shows how Salvini use sarcasm. He claims that the government’s choices concerning lockdown measures are nonsensical. Salvini talks about *Totodecreto* that recalls *Totocalcio* – an old Italian football betting game – in order to highlight the unpredictable choices of the government.



Figure 7. – Meloni, G. (2020, November 6)¹¹.



Figure 8. – Salvini, M. (2020, November 4)¹².

¹¹ The nonsense of a government that armours the regions and then opens the door wide to illegal immigration continues. But is Sicily an orange zone only for Italians?

¹² They lock millions of Italians in their homes, live on TV, without warning, on the basis of 10-day old data, without guaranteeing adequate refunds. And meanwhile they let more than 2,000 illegal immigrants disembark in a few hours. #conteincapece

The results of the qualitative analysis show that the approaches of Meloni and Salvini are very similar. During the first week they delegitimise the government and self-legitimise themselves through the proposal of strict lockdown measures to depict themselves as the only ones really interested in the well-being of the Italian people. These politicians try to comfort Italian people and reassure them through a patriotic attitude enhanced by self-celebration. We should remember that Italy was the first European country where the COVID-19 spread. In this context, Meloni and Salvini were extremely critical towards the EU and those countries – such as Slovenia (Meloni, G. 2020, March 11; Salvini, M. 2020, March 10) – that isolated Italy. However, Meloni and Salvini seem to differ on some aspects. On the one hand, Meloni is generally more institutional in her style of communication. She focuses on the *bringing up* category that allows her to legitimise herself – as the leader who tried to contribute to the containment of the pandemic through right proposals – and delegitimise the government that rejected her ideas. On the other hand, Salvini is more informal and tries to connect with the people through various strategies; he describes himself as a common man through his family role and religion (Salvini, M. 2020, March 14). During the second week both Meloni and Salvini changed opinion on the lockdown. They started proposing softer restrictions in comparison to the ones established by the government. This implies a strong combination of self-legitimation and other-delegitimation (towards the government and the EU). During the second period we also observed an increase of hate speech, especially concerning immigration. Meloni remains consistent with her intuitional approach, while Salvini has still an informal style and a wide use of sarcasm.

3.2. *The British case*

Beginning our analysis with the first lockdown, the first difference is the position Sturgeon and Farage had on restrictions and how they discussed them. As a supporter to lockdown, Sturgeon encouraged the citizens to follow the rules and to stay at home in many tweets. She also provided guidelines and praised those who were helping to avoid the spread of the virus by complying with the restrictions. She is also clever in the use of pronouns, as the tweet in *Figure 9* proves: by saying that “[...] you are helping to save lives”, she is reinforcing the sense of community of the Scottish people, addressing them directly and thus generating a sense of

connection. In general, when discussing the lockdown, she communicated using a civil tone and showed collaboration with the British government.



Figure 9. – Sturgeon, N. (2020, March 25a).



Figure 10. – Farage, N. (2020, March 27).

Conversely, Farage often shared his sceptical views on restrictions, being against the lockdown since the beginning of the pandemic. His tweets were harsh and critical towards the government and questioned how the entire pandemic situation was being managed. This was done with tough and challenging statements: “Who is running the country?” (Farage N., 2020, March 23) and “We will only obey a government that we respect” (Farage N., 2020, March 24a), aim at delegitimising specific figures (like Boris Johnson or Rishi Sunak) or the government in general. In

Figure 10, where a hopeless scenario is suggested, Farage compares the situation in the UK to that in East Germany in 1985, which was characterised by a sense of tension and social distrust (Rainer and Siedler 2009). By sarcastically adding “next thing children will be encouraged to report on their parents”, he described an absurd situation in which everyone spied upon each other for the authorities, threatening individual liberties.



Figure 11. – Sturgeon, N. (2020, March 28b).



Figure 12. – Farage, N. (2020, March 29).



Figure 13. – Farage, N. (2020, November 1).



Figure 14. – Sturgeon, N. (2020, October 31).

This is further confirmed in other tweets, like the one in *Figure 15*, where she is underlining the government’s lack of clarity and concreteness concerning furloughs. Moreover, the use of ‘we’ in this tweet creates an opposition between the Scottish government (or Scottish people) and that of the UK. Despite her criticism of the government, she was overall diplomatic in asking for more decisive resolutions, avoiding aggressive tones, firmly stating that what the Scottish government had heard thus far were “woolly words”.

Farage goes to an opposite direction, being extremely direct in his tweets against the government and not sparing colourful expressions to refer to other politicians. In a tweet where he directly addressed the Prime Minister, he accused him of being responsible for a disaster in the UK, stating that “On November 5th, Boris Johnson is blowing up our economy, our liberty and his own entire legacy” (Farage N., 2020, October 31a), following a press conference in which Johnson established a four-week lockdown. Moreover, in the tweet showed in *Figure 16*, Farage used similar tones to criticise the government in derogatory terms, describing it as a “complete shower” characterised by “incompetence, lack of leadership, dither, delay and no courage whatsoever”, following a repeated postponement of a news conference.



Figure 15. – Sturgeon, N. (2020, November 3).



Figure 16. – Farage, N. (2020, October 31b).

Ultimately, although some similarities can be found in Sturgeon and Farage's posts, it is also true that the two politicians' communicative strategies differ in some ways. Farage's focus is on giving contribution, also as a form of government delegitimation (the most frequent category in his case), and he distinguishes himself for his hyperbolic, sarcastic style. Sturgeon, on the contrary, has a more institutional approach, uses more emojis and is more concerned in connecting with the people and providing guidelines, especially during the first lockdown. Only during the second lockdown she criticises the government on some occasions, but she rarely does so explicitly.

What emerges from the qualitative analysis of the British data is a less 'visual' approach to social media as opposed to the Italian. Regarding the category of government delegitimation, prominent similarities can be observed between Salvini, Meloni and Farage, while Sturgeon stands out for her collaborative attitude. The reason might lie in the different role they played: while Farage, Salvini and Meloni belonged to the political opposition, Sturgeon was in fact the First Minister of Scotland at the time. This might explain why they had such different tones. Among all, Meloni and Sturgeon appear to have a more institutional style. Moreover, while Salvini and Meloni often cite newspapers to legitimise their opinions, Sturgeon never does so and Farage shares news either to legitimise his ideas or to comment them negatively, thus presenting his perspectives on specific events.

bined represent more than half of the identified keywords. Obviously, not all their occurrences are addressed to Matteo Salvini but his sarcastic tone is frequently the target of insults; one of his tweets of 15 March 2020 asking for a complete lockdown, schools included, has among the following illustrative replies: “Ma vattene a fanculo #salvinisciacallo”, “Cazzaro”, “Tu il lavoro non lo conosci lurido sciacallo merdoso ladrone leghista infame”¹⁷.

During the second lockdown we identified fewer keywords¹⁸ but the described trend is very similar, displaying a majority of keywords that are expressions of insults, disagreement, and mockery.

Also, the analysis of Meloni’s keywords during the first lockdown highlights a relative majority of terms referring to disagreement (8 keywords), swearing (10 keywords), and direct insults (13 keywords). It is in the very limited number of terms identified during the second lockdown that, together with criticism and swearing, we witness a higher number of terms that pick up, without necessarily criticising them, themes used by Giorgia Meloni, as the references to the *monopattino* (kick scooter, 67) discussed in the previous paragraph show.

Moving on to the UK keywords, *Table 5*, we see that the lemmas for the Farage sub-corpora are very similar to those identified for Matteo Salvini. Even apparently innocent keywords, e.g. ‘veg’ (111), are used to criticise him and his sarcastic remarks; Farage’s criticism of a programme to hire workers from European countries to collect fruit and vegetable, instead of offering those jobs to British citizens, is met with replies, such as “veg is rotting while you practice your dangerous populism”, “Obviously never done a day fruit/veg picking in your life!!”, and “Why don’t you go and pick some veg?” that express criticism to the easy solutions he is offering during a very critical time for the country.

In line with the results of the analysis of Sturgeon’s tweets, also the replies display a different tendency. Insults are very limited, idiot (82), shut (150), fuck (118), while for the first time we find terms that are expressions of solidarity, clap (81), or group belonging, expressed through the use Scottish terms wee (108), yer (58), aye (54).

(racist, 172), *deficiente* (retarded, 108), *incapace* (incompetent, 242), *matta* (crazy, 95), *irresponsabile* (irresponsible, 117), *patetico* (pathetic, 114), *cazzaroverde* (greenfuck, 81).

¹⁷ “Just go fuck off #salvinisciacallo”, “Dumb-ass”, “you don’t know what work is, you filthy jackal, shitty thief, shameful legista [form the La Lega party]”.

¹⁸ The number of keywords that match the selected criteria decreases when we select a smaller sub-corpus; this explains the quantitative differences between the 1st and 2nd lockdown as well as the differences among the four politicians.

Table 4. – Italian keywords.

SALVINI 1ST LOCKDOWN		MELONI 1ST LOCKDOWN		SALVINI 2ND LOCKDOWN		MELONI 2ND LOCKDOWN	
<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>
sciacallo	125	Giorgia	126	mascherina	83	incapace	27
coglione	72	Meloni	73	cheerleader	66	cazzata	42
Salvini	63	MES	56	Trump	58	cazzo	28
buffone	55	zitto	46	Salvini	54	vergognare	31
cazzo	51	italexit	45	coglione	47	covid	67
zitto	50	sciacalla	39	cazzata	44	pandemia	26
cazzata	42	sciacallo	39	covid	41	sanità	15
merda	40	coronavirus	36	cazzo	37	virus	15
mascherina	34	coglione	35	Biden	34	Meloni	96
cazzaro	33	cazzo	35	merda	33	Giorgia	74
coronavirus	30	Lagarde	32	clandestino	31	monopattino	62
vergognare	30	vergognare	31	vergognare	30	salvini	42
pagliaccio	29	sovranisti	31	pagliaccio	29	stipendio	22
leghista	29	cazzata	29	tweet	29	governare	22
culo	28	Bertolaso	29	zitto	29	opposizione	21
cagare	27	sciacallaggio	29	lockdown	27	governo	16
tacere	27	amuchina	28	Lamorgese	26	tu	14
quarantena	26	giorgiameloni	27	sciacallo	25	Conte	14
salvinisciaccio	25	virus	26	Capezzone	25	nominare	14
cialtrone	25	melone	26	schifo	22	Calabria	14
virus	25	idiota	24	Mattè	22		
Zaia	24	mascherina	24	culo	22		
mattè	23	iorestocasa	23	idiota	21		
idiota	23	merda	22	incapace	21		
capitone	23	culo	22	salvinibloccami	21		
Bertolaso	22	Salvini	21	Cotticelli	21		
cretino	22	propaganda	21	contagio	21		
iorestocasa	22	cagare	20	buffone	21		
Matteo	21	quarantena	20	ignorante	20		
propaganda	20	sovranista	19	salvinivergognati	20		
italexit	20	Slovenia	18	incompetente	20		
ignorante	18	ignorante	18	tampone	20		
stronzata	18	tacere	18	Matteo	20		
imbecille	17	chiudere	18	monopattino	19		
Morisi	17	imbecille	18	sbarco	19		
matteosalvinimi	17	Consob	17	virus	19		
schifo	17	tweet	17	cagare	18		
amuchina	17	cretino	17	vergogna	18		

SALVINI 1ST LOCKDOWN		MELONI 1ST LOCKDOWN		SALVINI 2ND LOCKDOWN		MELONI 2ND LOCKDOWN	
<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>
chiuderetutto	16	giorgina	16	Giletti	18		
contagio	15	schifo	16	assembramento	18		
matto	15	ipocrita	16	matteosalvinimi	18		
Lagarde	15	idiozia	14	cazzaro	17		
contagiare	14	tu	14	pandemia	17		
capitano	14	UE	14	Lombardia	17		
rompere	14	vergogna	14	sfiga	16		
scemo	14	scemo	13	Fontana	16		
vaffanculo	13	pandemia	13	stronzata	16		
sciaccallaggio	13	italiani	12	cialtrone	16		
pirla	13	Mattarella	12	matto	15		
ridicolo	13	frontiera	12	DPCM	15		
vergogna	13	Conte	12	imbecille	15		
demente	13	contagio	12	ridicolo	14		
minchia	13	contagiare	11	propaganda	14		
salvinivergognati	13	smettere	11	Maio	14		
bacioni	13	governo	11	leghista	13		
incompetente	12	incapace	11	ondata	13		
mojito	12	confusione	10	governo	13		
razzista	12	rompere	10	selfie	13		
deficiente	12	emergenza	10	governatore	13		
caxxo	11	Europa	10	lega	12		
fregare	11	polemica	10	governare	12		
idiozia	11	fregare	10	Conte	12		
incapace	11	epidemia	10	opposizione	11		
sovranisti	11			contagiare	11		
Conte	11			quarantena	11		
infettare	11			razzista	11		
matta	11			capitano	10		
irresponsabile	11			tacere	10		
troll	11			vaccino	10		
coronavirusitalia	11			fregare	10		
giuseppeconteit	11			arancione	10		
patetico	10						
minchiate	10						
lega	10						
sparisci	10						
Giletti	10						
cazzaroverde	10						

SALVINI 1ST LOCKDOWN		MELONI 1ST LOCKDOWN		SALVINI 2ND LOCKDOWN		MELONI 2ND LOCKDOWN	
<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>
pandemia	10						
Papeete	10						
Matté	10						

Table 5. – UK keywords.

FARAGE 1ST LOCKDOWN		STURGEON 1ST LOCKDOWN		FARAGE 2ND LOCKDOWN		STURGEON 2ND LOCKDOWN	
<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>
Nigel	150	Nicola	122	Nigel	184	lockdown	163
Macron	138	Boris	55	Farage	141	furlough	162
Farage	136	Sturgeon	43	lockdown	134	Nicola	78
Nige	119	SNP	38	Nige	108	SNP	70
fuck	74	ppe	37	covid	101	covid	64
Boris	61	lockdown	33	Boris	73	Sturgeon	60
Cummings	55	clap	29	fuck	62	tier	47
idiot	54	necessity	29	trump	53	Boris	44
shut	50	Fm	28	idiot	43	devolve	40
twat	44	essential	27	_farage	37	gov	38
moron	40	wee	25	Brexit	37	Westminster	38
border	39	idiot	24	grift	36	independence	36
virus	32	gov	24	virus	35	wm	35
_farage	31	NH	24	twat	30	Scotland	34
stupid	29	Yer	22	grifter	29	indy	29
shit	27	virus	22	shit	26	FM	28
racist	25	shut	22	flu	25	wee	27
EU	24	distancing	22	bandwagon	21	Scot	26
irrelevant	24	tweet	21	arse	21	virus	26
Brexit	23	Aye	21	moron	20	tweet	25
govt	22	fuck	19	gullible	20	idiot	23
thankfully	22	troll	19	immunity	20	aye	22
Dominic	21	worker	18	mask	19	govt	21
Khan	21	Scot	16	tory	18	borrow	19
lockdown	19	clarification	16	vaccine	18	eh	19
prick	18	ya	16	racist	18	fuck	17
brit	18	Scotland	15	govt	18	beg	16
tweet	17	non	15	dolphin	18	twitter	16
oh	17	clarity	15	stupid	17	tory	16
utter	17	self	15	piss	17	restriction	15
cunt	17	vulnerable	14	vote	16	nationalist	15

FARAGE 1ST LOCKDOWN		STURGEON 1ST LOCKDOWN		FARAGE 2ND LOCKDOWN		STURGEON 2ND LOCKDOWN	
<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Score</i>
veg	17	dont	13	mate	16	lock	15
France	17	stay	12	opportunist	16	stupid	15
arse	16	NHS	12	cunt	15	borrowing	15
ventilator	16	cant	12	Sweden	15	u	14
mate	16	tomorrow	12	pandemic	15	trump	14
Johnson	15	u	11	oh	15	border	14
bot	15	supermarket	11	shut	15	shut	14
clown	15	coronavirus	11	clown	15	resign	13
pandemic	15	tory	11	quarantine	14	Scottish	13
piss	14	thank	10	fool	13	pandemic	13
corona	14			fascist	13	England	13
pathetic	14			politician	13	nation	12
eh	14			irrelevant	13	dont	12
bullshit	14			tweet	12	money	11
ffs	13			Tories	12	unionist	11
hypocrite	13			reset	11	Glasgow	11
sovereignty	13			anti	11	lol	10
blame	13			party	11		
selfish	12			election	10		
immigrant	12			yeah	10		
obey	12			herd	10		
shutdown	12			poll	10		
fascist	12			conspiracy	10		
ppl	11						
immunity	11						
remainer	11						
nonsense	11						
unelected	11						
globalisation	11						
ignorant	11						
fool	11						
gov	10						

5. CONCLUSION

The qualitative part of the analysis revealed that all leaders used Twitter strategically for different purposes – linked to their institutional roles – during the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Sturgeon employed Twitter to recommend specific guidelines, represent herself as a reliable institutional figure and to reassure the Scottish people, insisting on the Scottish context and identity. Our findings thus confirm those of previous studies (March, 2017) that highlight how Sturgeon's 'soft' approach to social media communication, an approach that rejects the continuous use of delegitimation strategies and hate speech, can be related to the more inclusionary, socio-economically focused nature of left populism, revolving around the pro-immigration, pro-EU, and institutional stance of the SNP. Moreover, it has been observed (Pappas and Kriesi 2015) that populist leaders tend to mitigate their discourse when they are in charge, which confirms some of the trends that emerged from the qualitative analysis of Sturgeon's tweets.

On the other hand, Farage, Salvini, and Meloni used their accounts primarily to criticise the government's action while representing themselves as the right and reassuring leaders the people should follow. In addition, Farage exploited this time of crisis – more precisely the 2nd lockdown – to relaunch his Brexit party as Reform UK describing it as the political alternative to lockdown.

These leaders share many similarities but they do differ on some aspects. For instance, all of them changed their opinion about restrictions from the 1st to the 2nd lockdown, except for Farage who has always been against all restrictive policies; Sturgeon, diverging from Farage, Salvini, and Meloni, is the only leader whose populist rhetoric is not dominated by delegitimation, hate speech, and references to immigration. Although all leaders employ similar strategies, they have different attitudes. Sturgeon and Meloni represent themselves as reliable and firm politicians, using a more institutional (Sturgeon) or professional (Meloni) communicative approach. On the other hand, Farage and Salvini share a more over-the-top, flamboyant, and hyperbolic communicative style, supported by a widespread use of sarcasm.

These different attitudes and styles seem to have a strong effect on Twitter users' responses. The quantitative analysis has highlighted that Salvini and Farage, the two politicians sharing a more over-the-top attitude, receive the largest share of insults and criticism. Meloni's tweets receive open opposition, which is in turn possibly slightly mitigated by

her blunt yet low-key style. Sturgeon is the only politician who receives more support by Twitter users, possibly due to her institutional role as well as to her ‘soft’ approach to social media communication.

Even if it is not possible to identify a direct cause and effect relationship between the style of the politician and the reaction it produces in the online users’ responses, we argue that there is a strong connection between populists’ attitudes and Twitter users’ responses, which should be investigated further, and which could shed new light on the interactional dynamics of online polarising discourses.

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The Gender-Differentiated Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Health and Social Inequalities in the UK

An Exploration of Gendered Themes within Private and Public Discourse and Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has evidenced the gender differentiated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on health and socio-economic inequalities in the UK. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender inequalities particularly regarding the increased burden of unpaid care work, health, education, and gender-based violence have been evidenced in a number of recent studies (O'Donnell *et al.* 2021; Flor *et al.* 2022; Herten-Crabb and Wenham 2022; Dotsikas *et al.* 2023). In particular, gendered inequalities are reflected in gendered themes within caregivers' discourse and reports on patterns among caregivers. This chapter analyses recent empirical evidence relating to the gender-differentiated health, economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in the UK. The chapter also explores recent research relating to gendered themes within private and public discourse relating to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is followed by a discussion of the policy implications of private and public discourse relating to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gendered health inequalities in the UK. The main findings of the chapter are that the burden of normative expectations placed on women during the two lockdowns in the UK were overwhelming, with mothers facing extraordinary levels of emotional and psychological stress as they struggled to cope with conflicting demands of domestic work, home schooling, working from home and/or working within health care or social care. Moreover, women and caregivers in general faced extraordinary pressures

in attempting to live up to dominant public narratives of caregivers as stoic and heroic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; economic inequalities; gender inequalities; health inequalities; policy discourse; private discourse; public discourse; social inequalities.

1. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

International research from a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields informs understandings of the direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of people of different genders. Here, the World Health Organisation actively encourages the collating, reporting, and analysis of data on confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths disaggregated by sex, gender, and age. In particular, investment in “quality gender responsive research on the potentially differential adverse health, social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on women and men” is advanced to enable the development of meaningful and responsive policies (WHO 2020).

Recent Studies have revealed the regressive impact of the pandemic on women’s employment and unpaid care work, particularly regarding lower household income and food insecurity (Bogotá 2020; Francis-Devine *et al.* 2021; Gottardello and Mazrekaj 2021; de Flor *et al.* 2022; Wielgoszewska *et al.* 2023). In the UK as across societies globally, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the precarious position of women in the labour market. In 2019, women were a third more likely to work in an employment sector that was shut down by coronavirus than men. In particular, mothers were 1.5 times more likely to have been made redundant because of the COVID-19 pandemic (IFS 2020). Moreover, women in the UK were more likely to be in groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic, as 69% of low earners in the UK are women, 54% of women in the UK are on zero-hour contracts and 59% of women in the UK are in part-time self-employment (Women’s Budget Group 2020).

A burgeoning body of research evidence has also illuminated gender-differentiated impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. A deeper understanding of these impacts requires recognition of existing and deeply embedded social norms, economic inequalities, and unequal power relations (Orefice and Quintana-Domeque 2021). Recent evidence has informed understandings of the immediate effects of COVID-19 on gender inequality particularly regarding the increased burden of unpaid care work,

health, education, and gender-based violence (O'Donnell *et al.* 2021; Flor *et al.* 2022; Herten-Crabb and Wenham 2022; Dotsikas *et al.* 2023). Moreover, recent research has identified gendered themes in caregivers' discourse and reports on patterns among caregivers (Ioanna *et al.* 2021; Dotsikas *et al.* 2023). Illustrating this, Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque (2021) found that in the UK women's mental health was worse than men's mental health during the enforced COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. These differences were identified across several dimensions including depression, loneliness, generalized anxiety disorder and panic attacks (Müller *et al.* 2021; Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque 2021). Critically, studies also revealed interconnected vulnerabilities emerging from class, race, and gender during the COVID-19 pandemic (Keys *et al.* 2021; Moore *et al.* 2021). As Keys *et al.* argue "an intersectional framework for analysis is vital in this COVID-19 moment as it teaches us a lot about enduring multiple and mutually constitutive health and social inequalities related to race, class, age, gender and disability" (Keys *et al.* 2021, 6).

Critically also, systemic, and socio-cultural factors strongly influence how care as an activity and caring roles are conceptualised and valued within distinct societies. Thus, caregivers may also be subjected to long term health impacts irrespective of gender, class, ethnicity, age, or disability. The lived realities of being a formal or informal carer-giver during the COVID-19 pandemic have been evidenced in a number of studies (Dhiman *et al.* 2020; Altieri and Santangelo 2021; Giebel *et al.* 2023; Hansen 2023). The range of recent empirical studies relating to distinct groups illustrates the heterogeneity of caregivers in the UK and across societies globally. Here research studies relating to the impact of caregiving on physical and mental health reveal that existing vulnerabilities and protective factors are strongly related to physical and mental health outcomes endured by informal care givers (Hansen *et al.* 2023; Rippon 2023; Whitley *et al.* 2023). Illustrating this, Whitley *et al.* (2023) found that whilst overall the mental health of home carers deteriorated more during lockdown in the UK, some subgroups of caregivers suffered poorer mental health than others. For example, women had poorer mental health outcomes than men. In addition, caregivers who provide more hours of care and have been caring longer and people who were spousal carers and carers for family members suffered poorer mental health outcomes.

These empirical findings reveal a complex picture regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of caregivers as a heterogeneous group in the UK. Overall, these findings also raise key systemic questions in relation to the care economy in the UK and

across societies globally particularly regarding support provided to formal and informal caregivers as a heterogeneous group within the context of future pandemics. Crucially however research reveals the pre-dominance of women within care-giving populations and the increased burden and intensity of caring responsibilities born by women during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baowen and McMunn 2021; Zsuzsa *et al.* 2021; Phillips *et al.* 2022). These gendered inequalities are exacerbated by entrenched cultural norms and gendered expectations regarding traditional gender roles within the domestic sphere in the UK and across societies globally. Here, a burgeoning body of research has exposed “the second shift problem” that women encounter on a daily basis whereby women who are in paid employment are also expected to do most or all of the caring and domestic work necessary to keep the household functioning (Blair-Loy *et al.* 2015; Brailey and Slatton 2019; Dugan *et al.* 2020; Aldossari and Chaudhry 2021). This situation was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic by the large-scale closure of educational institutions and childcare facilities which meant that parents took on the responsibility for home schooling and unpaid childcare. As a number of empirical studies have shown this work was undertaken more often by women than men due to the continued dominance of traditional gender roles across societies globally and also due to the pre-dominance of women in part-time, low paid and flexible employment (Zhou *et al.* 2020; Cook and Grimshaw 2021; Grasso *et al.* 2021; Powers 2021; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021). Moreover, women working within the formal care economy often had to balance paid work as health and social care professionals within the front line of the COVID-19 pandemic with domestic, caring, and home-schooling responsibilities (Maryam and Chaudhry 2021; Xue and McMunn 2021). As Kate Powers (2021) observes the burden of these additional demands meant that women were effectively enduring “the third shift problem” during the COVID-19 pandemic across social settings at a global level. A growing body of international epidemiological studies reveal the deleterious health impacts of the “third shift problem” for women. A unifying theme emerging across a number of epidemiological studies relates to the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of women due to their increased exposure to stressors relating to caregiving during this period (Wenham 2020; Vloo *et al.* 2021; Wade *et al.* 2021; Del Río-Lozano *et al.* 2022; Garcia *et al.* 2022; Stöckel and Bom 2022).

More broadly, gendered health inequalities generated within the COVID-19 pandemic are closely interconnected within pre-existing gen-

dered socio-economic and labour market inequalities across developed Western democratic societies and societies globally (Yavorsky *et al.* 2021; Phillips *et al.* 2022). In particular, a substantial body of research reveals that across societies globally women are more likely to occupy precarious low paid jobs than men (United Nations 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic these types of jobs particularly within the female dominated service sector were more prone to redundancy than jobs within male dominated sectors such as manufacturing and construction (Bădoi 2021; Cook and Grimshaw 2021; Veitch, 2023). As in most Western democratic societies, there is also clear evidence of gendered labour market inequalities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Exemplifying this a major study undertaken by Wielgoszewska *et al.* (2023) revealed that during and after the COVID-19 pandemic women’s employment in the UK was more likely to be adversely impacted than men’s and that these impacts were more severe for women with a partner and children.

The UK was selected as a case study for this article as it shares key characteristics of a Western democratic societies particularly regarding well-developed health care services, social care services, social protection and childcare provisions and institutions. Critically however, historical variations in levels of health and social care expenditure and subsequent levels of support for women as parents, carers and workers across Western democratic societies have had a significant impact on gendered health inequalities within distinct welfare settings before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Murphy 2019; Bamba *et al.* 2020; Walsh *et al.* 2022; Beck and Gwilym 2023; Veitch 2023). In the UK, the welfare reforms and severe austerity measures that followed the Financial Crises of 2007 to 2008 led to drastic reductions in health, education, and welfare expenditure (Greer Murphy 2017; Haynes 2020; Farnsworth 2021; Jenkins *et al.* 2021; Bray *et al.* 2022; Jupp 2022; Walsh *et al.* 2022; Beck and Gwilym 2023). The resultant impact on gendered health inequalities in the UK has been evidenced by a number of epidemiological studies (Darlington-Pollock and Norman 2019; Demakakos *et al.* 2019; Marmot 2020; McKee *et al.* 2021; Blundell 2022; Walsh 2022). Exemplifying this, a recent major study by the Health Foundation (2022) found that millions of women who live in the most socio-economically deprived areas of England, have a life expectancy of 78.7 years this is approximately 8 years lower than women living in the wealthiest areas of England (The Health Foundation 2022). This represents the lowest average life expectancy for women of all OECD countries apart from Mexico. Further to this a major epidemiological study conducted by Marmot *et al.* in 2020 found

that the life expectancy for the poorest ten per cent of women in England had decreased since 2010 and that austerity measures and welfare reforms enacted over the last decade have contributed significantly to gendered health inequalities in the UK. More broadly, the life expectancy of women in the UK as a whole was ranked lower than 26 OECD countries in 2022 (OECD 2023). Recent studies have found that the severe austerity measures enacted in the UK during the decade prior to the COVID-19 pandemic contributed significantly to these gendered health inequalities, as women are most likely to be on the lowest incomes, be lone parents, or to retire with a lower pension and are thereby disproportionately impacted upon by reduced levels of social security and the withdrawal of public services (Greer-Murphy 2017; Reis 2018; Dabrowski 2020; Walsh *et al.* 2022). This situation is particularly pronounced for disabled women and women from minority ethnic groups living in the UK (Allen 2018; Gibbs 2018; Lisney 2019; Rummery 2019). Whilst these specificities relating to the severity of austerity measures enacted in the UK limit the extent to which research findings from the UK are generalisable, recent international studies provide clear evidence of common themes with regard to the lived experiences of women during the COVID-19 pandemic across Western democratic societies. Core themes emerging from these studies include the impact of increased levels of informal caregiving due to the closure of educational and childcare institutions during lockdown periods on the mental health of women and the regressive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's employment and unpaid care work, particularly regarding lower household income (Almeida *et al.* 2020; Blaskó 2020; Carli 2020; Fortier 2020; Jacques-Aviñó 2020; Power 2020; Rubery and Tavora 2020; Grasso 2021; Zamarro *et al.* 2021; Goldin 2022; Toffolutti *et al.* 2022).

The purpose of this paper is three-fold. Firstly, to analyse recent empirical evidence relating to the gender-differentiated health, economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in the UK. Secondly, to explore recent research relating to gendered themes within private and public discourse relating to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirdly to discuss the policy implications of private and public discourse relating to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gendered health inequalities in the UK.

2. CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

A holistic biopsychosocial conceptual approach to health inequalities underpins the theoretical approach adopted within this chapter. This approach was adopted as a result of a critical review of a broad range of empirical and theoretical data and literature relating to the gender differentiated impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health Inequalities in the UK. Intrinsically this framework proposes that inequalities in the social determinants of health such as employment, work-life balance, and low-income impact significantly on health inequalities (Wenham 2020; Del Río-Lozano *et al.* 2022; Stöckel and Bom 2022). Critically, there is also substantial empirical evidence that psychosocial factors such as stress have a significant impact on health and wellbeing (Etheridge and Spantig 2022; Dotsikas *et al.* 2023; Kourti *et al.* 2023). Here, psychosocial pathways between the social determinants of health and physical and mental health have been evidenced as being strongly related to social roles and gender traits (Etheridge 2022). Previous research has also revealed that women have experienced higher levels of mental diseases across all regions in the world within every age group as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO 2023). In particular, research evidence has shown that social roles, particularly regarding caring roles have a significant negative impact on levels of stress which acts as a direct pathway to poorer physical and mental health. Here, whilst studies have revealed that women who are in employment have more positive health outcomes (Women’s Budget Group 2023), being a caregiver impacts negatively on both physical and mental well-being (Schulz and Sherwood 2007). Here, a number of recent studies have revealed that providing care, especially to family members negatively impacts on physical and mental health (Herten-Crabb and Wenham 2022; Dotsikas *et al.* 2023; Kourti *et al.* 2023). The psychosocial pathways underlying this are complex however, there is clear epidemiological evidence that this is related to the higher levels of stressors impacting on care givers in comparison to non-care givers (Son 2007).

Exposure to strain as a result of these stressors is higher in women than men because women are more often caregivers than men across societies globally (Di Fazio *et al.* 2022) . The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and exposed these gendered health inequalities (Wenham 2020; Del Río-Lozano *et al.* 2022; Stöckel and Bom 2022). A study by Stockel and Born (2022) revealed the “negative mental health effects of informal care provision and show that the effects persist up to four or five years after initial care provision” (Stockel and Born 2022, 12).

The COVID-19 pandemic placed a huge burden on health and social care systems, severely restricting access to formal care, education, and support services across societies at a global level. This led to an exponential increase in the number of people being cared for and educated in the home. The utilisation of a biopsychosocial conceptual approach is appropriate to an exploration of the gender-differentiated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on health and social inequalities in the UK as a burgeoning body of empirical research has shown that women bore the largest share of caring responsibilities within the home during the lockdown and associated measures of COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Moreover, recent epidemiological evidence has revealed that amongst the care-giver population as a whole women had poorer mental health outcomes than men as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and associated measures implemented in the UK and across societies globally (WHO 2023).

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodological approach is theory driven thematic analysis underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology. Thematic analysis is an appropriate tool for this research in enabling the identification and analysis of patterns of meaning relating to the gendered differentiated impacts of health inequalities emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK.

The research involves three stages.

1. Literature review. A critical review of a broad range of empirical and theoretical data and literature relating to the gender differentiated impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health inequalities in the UK.
2. A systematic review of existing qualitative studies focussing on a thematic analysis of gendered themes within public and private discourse relating to health and social inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic. A deductive approach was adopted. The critical review of literature (stage one) formed the conceptual basis for the theory driven thematic analysis. This approach centred upon the biopsychosocial model of gendered health inequalities. The text was coded line by line to develop descriptive and analytical themes. The descriptive themes were closely aligned to the themes identified in the primary studies; The analytical themes were then interpreted within the conceptual framework developed from stage one of the research.
3. An exploration and discussion of policy implications within the UK.

4. HEALTH INEQUALITIES ARISING FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have profound impacts on the lives of people globally. Recent epidemiological evidence has underlined the differential impact of the disease on male, female, and non-binary genders. International epidemiological studies have revealed that males have overall increased risk of infection, intensive care unit admission and morbidity than females (Mukherjee and Kalipada 2021; Chaturvedi *et al.* 2022; Demetriou *et al.* 2023). These differences have been found to relate to distinct biological vulnerabilities such as sex-based immunology responses and to gendered differences in negative health behaviours often generated by gendered social norms such as alcohol consumption and smoking (Chaturvedi *et al.* 2022; Demetriou *et al.* 2023). Overall, however, increased vulnerability to the disease has also been shown to correlate closely with socially ascribed roles. Here, being in formal and informal health and social care roles has been shown to significantly increase direct health risks associated with the COVID-19 virus. Within the formal health and social care sectors in the UK, people who identified as females occupied 75% of National Health Service roles and 81% of social care roles during the COVID-19 pandemic (ONS 2020). In terms of the general population in the UK females were thus more exposed to the risks of contracting the disease than males. Underlining this, recent studies have shown that females are much more likely to suffer long COVID than males in the UK (Stroud and Gutman 2021; Pantelic *et al.* 2022; Subramanian *et al.* 2022; Thompson *et al.* 2022). In the UK two forms of long COVID have been categorised. These are ongoing symptomatic COVID which can last for four to twelve weeks and post-COVID Syndrome when symptoms continue for over twelve weeks.

A survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics (UK Government) in January 2022 found that 510,000 women in the UK suffered from forms of long COVID which affected their activities a little compared to 353,000 men (ONS 2022). Critically the survey also revealed that a further 214,000 women suffered long COVID symptoms which seriously affected their daily lives compared to 132,000 men (ONS 2022). Long COVID symptoms include, heart palpitations, difficulty breathing, dizziness, insomnia and depression and anxiety. Deterioration in mental health has been found to be one of the most prevalent direct and indirect consequences of the COVID-19 virus (Chaturvedi *et al.* 2022; Dotsikas *et al.* 2023). The most important gendered effects on deterioration in mental health in women have been revealed as being related to

increased levels of caring responsibilities and domestic duties within the home and increased levels of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK and across societies globally (Proto and Quintana-Domeque 2021; Xue and McMunn 2021; Herten-Crabb and Wenham 2022; Dotsikas *et al.* 2023; Kourti *et al.* 2023). As in societies globally, the closures of schools and nurseries during the two lockdowns were found to exacerbate these conditions for women. Critically, several research studies have highlighted the lack of psychosocial support for health care workers, 75% of whom were women (Herten-Crabb and Wenham 2022; Kourti *et al.* 2023).

As a result, several studies have emphasised the need for gender responsive interventions in the UK and across societies globally (Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020). There is now clear evidence that women have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Women in the UK and beyond have been impacted upon by the disproportionate loss of employment due to the feminized nature of service industries which were impacted upon by the lockdowns. During the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic job loss rates were lower for women than for men in the UK. This was because over 75% of health and social care and 70% of education roles were occupied by women (ONS 2020). In addition, women occupied a high proportion of occupations that could be carried out at home. Critically however, studies found that women were more likely to accept the offer of a furlough scheme due to increased caring responsibilities in the home. Moreover, women were found to be more likely to have their paid work interrupted by domestic work and caring responsibilities in the home than men (Andrew *et al.* 2020; Flor *et al.* 2022).

Exemplifying this in 2021, 26% of women compared to 20% of men in the UK reported employment loss. Moreover, women were much more likely to forgo paid employment to care for others in the home than men and by September 2021, women were eight times more likely than men to forgo paid employment to care for others in the home (Flor *et al.* 2022).

In addition, women and girls were twenty-one times more likely than men and boys to report dropping out of school for reasons other than school closures (Flor *et al.* 2022). Finally, women were twenty-three times more likely than men to report that gender-based violence had increased during the pandemic (ONS 2021). In addition, as Alon *et al.* (2020) evidence women were placed under greater strain because of gendered norms underlying social roles related to childcare when nurseries and schools were closed whilst also finding themselves isolated from the support of extended families during lockdown periods.

Public and private discourses may be regarded as both reinforcing and generating socio-cultural, ecological, and systemic environments experienced by formal and informal care givers regardless of their gender identity within distinct societies. From a Feminist perspective however the gendered norms underlying social roles within distinct societal settings have been pivotal in shaping the struggles faced by women within distinct societies as a disproportionate number of primary caregivers were women during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK and globally (Gilson 2021; Smith *et al.* 2021; Whiley *et al.* 2021).

5. GENDERED THEMES WITHIN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DISCOURSE RELATING TO THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON WOMEN IN THE UK

5.1. *Descriptive themes within public discourse*

Recent literature has evidenced the continued significance of the media in shaping public discourse and the construction and maintenance of societal norms and values across societal settings (Braun and Gillespie 2011; Saraisky 2016; Zinn and Müller 2022). In contrast to private discourse through which individuals communicate their personal feelings and develop relationships public discourse is often regarded as a central mechanism through which public policies, socio-cultural norms, values, roles and systems are legitimated and reinforced. Here, media institutions ranging from TV and radio media outlets to print media and social media are regarded as playing a pivotal role in shaping public opinion. During the period of the two COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and related measures between March 2020 and December 2021 UK media institutions and outlets became highly influential in shaping public opinion particularly regarding ensuring compliance with lockdown regulations and related measures.

Exemplifying this, a major study conducted by Sowden *et al.* (2021) found that health care workers were often described in on-line UK newspaper reports as ‘heroes’ or ‘angels’ rather than as human beings with fears and needs. Here, the authors found that less homogenous and fear-based coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in conjunction with clearer information about support available to both formal and informal care givers would have been more helpful to carers in the UK.

6. SELECTION OF DATA SET FOR ANALYSIS

Six qualitative studies were selected for the systematic review. The studies were selected as a representative sample of peer reviewed articles published in international journals. In addition, the research articles are drawn from a range of disciplinary areas including Medicine, Politics, Sociology, Psychology and Nursing Studies.

6.1. Textual data set

1. Herten-Crabb, Asha, and Clare Wenham. 2022. "‘I was facilitating everybody else’s life. And mine had just ground to a halt’: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Women in the United Kingdom". *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 29 (4): 1213-1235.
2. Adisa, T.A., O. Aiyenitaju, and O.D. Adekoya. 2021. "The Work-Family Balance of British Working Women during the COVID-19 Pandemic". *Journal of Work-Applied Management* 13 (2): 241-260.
3. Mohammed, Shan, Elizabeth Peter, Tiegghan Killackey, and Jane Maciver. 2021. "The ‘Nurse as Hero’ Discourse in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Poststructural Discourse Analysis". *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 117: 103887.
4. Aughterson, Henry, Alison R. McKinlay, Daisy Fancourt, and Alexandra Burton. 2021. "Psychosocial Impact on Frontline Health and Social Care Professionals in the UK during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Interview Study". *BMJ Open* 11 (2): e047353.
5. Einboden, Rochelle. 2020. "SuperNurse? Troubling the Hero Discourse in COVID Times". *Health* 24 (4): 343-347.
6. Regenold, Nina, and Cecilia Vindrola-Padros. 2021. "Gender Matters: A Gender Analysis of Healthcare Workers’ Experiences during the First COVID-19 Pandemic Peak in England". *Social Sciences* 10 (2): 43.

7. DATA SET ANALYSIS

Four common descriptive themes within Public and Private Discourse emerged from across the six studies.

Figure 1 provides a list of these themes with selected textual examples.

FIGURE ONE

Descriptive Theme	Public/Private Discourse	Quotation	Paper	Code
a) Care givers exalted for their 'heroism' and 'stoicism' during the lockdown periods and associated measures.	Private	"The majority of NHS staff seem to be women and they are considered our heroes, but they don't actually get funded"; "You know, don't go 'oh love,' because it's a bit patronising isn't it, ah, you lovely nurse, you lovely carer, you're going in there to look after the old people ... and they're potentially going to die on £6 an hour without a mask?" (p1224, line 6)	(1)	(a.pr.f)
		"I'm a nurse. For myself, and many of my colleagues, our profession constitutes not just what we do, but who we are. Nurses remain vulnerable to hero discourses because our work is entangled with our identity"(p 344, line 17)	(5)	(a.pr.f)
		"After eight weeks of clapping, I feel completely betrayed and as though what myself and my colleagues went through was just expected of us as our duty". (page 5 line 44)	(3)	(a.pr.f)
		"You've got to be a superhero, you've got to look after your kids, you've got to manage the house, you've got to keep your husband out of the way, and get on with the other life that you normally do, which is working as well, and somehow fit it in." (p1226, line 20)	(1)	(a.pr.i)
	Public	"Health Care Heroes of the COVID-19 Pandemic" (page 344, line 30)	(5)	(a.pu.f)
		"Depictions in the media often drew on religious notions of martyrdom to describe nurses' selflessness in uncertain and, at times, dangerous conditions". (page 4, line 34)	(3)	(a.pu.f)
		"The framed artwork, entitled 'game changer' depicts a young boy kneeling on the floor playing with a brand-new superhero doll. In the background, a waste bin holds two well-known but now discarded superheroes, Batman, and Spiderman. The boy's attention is on his new toy, Supernurse"(p 333, line 10)	(5)	(a.pu.f)
		"The nurse as hero discourse has found public expression through community performances (e.g., singing from balconies, clapping, and banging pots and pans), corporate visibility (e.g., TV commercials, marketing campaigns, and promotional offers to healthcare staff), and governmental displays (e.g., military tributes, politician speeches, and light shows on public buildings)" (page 2, line 32)	(3)	(a.pu.f)
b) Impact of Covid 19 Pandemic lockdowns and related measures on physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.	Private	"The demands of paid labour and increases in unpaid labour have taken an emotional and psychological toll on women: whether in a loss of identity having to give up their work, or with more acute mental health concerns as a combined result of the risks of the virus, worry about their children, their financial concerns (or a combination of all of these), and a sense of being at the limit of their emotional bandwidth, unable to take more stresses and trying to juggle these competing demands" (page 1226, line 12)	(1)	(b.pr.f)
		"you just become quite tired...it culminated with masks, visors, aprons, hot weather and regulations changing and sometimes you'd come home from a shift and feel you'd been pulled in all directions really" (Page 5, line 38)	(6)	(b.pr.f)
		I was quite anxious about being in the office with COVID I had some colleagues of mine who were able to work from home... I was told that this wasn't possible... it was business as usual. It was a real sense of frustration, not feeling that you're being listened to by my manager and just a sense of feeling overwhelmed and quite helpless about the situation. (page 6, line 46)	(4)	(b.pr.i)
		"Crying at work was most commonly reported by nurses; one nurse described a particularly hard night, "I think everyone that night cried literally every hour on a	(6)	(b.pr.f)

		<p>corner”. Nurses in charge also seemed to carry a heavy emotional burden, even though they were less involved in caring for patients. Nurse leads described supporting and carrying their team, which included “sucking up a lot of sadness for the team” (page 6, line 36)</p> <p>the virus messes with your head more than it does your body if you’re not hospitalised. That’s just down to the media at the end of the day. There’s so much media and so much emphasis on death, not so much on recovery (page 6, line 54)</p> <p>“There’s been a huge amount of emotional support that we’ve had to give through anxiety, through grief. All that has been heightened quite greatly really. And a deeper sense of sadness in yourself, that you’re trying to support people and having that empathy for them, thinking this is just absolutely horrendous for them” (page 4, line 26)</p>	<p>(4)</p> <p>(4)</p>	<p>(b.pr.i)</p> <p>(b.pr.f)</p>
<p>c) Mothers balancing care of children with formal employment</p>	<p>Private</p>	<p>“It’s been difficult. I don’t feel like I’ve been a good teacher in terms of I felt very unable to motivate them in the right way, to do their work in the ways that I would like them to do. It’s all seemed a bit futile in places, so draining at home . . . and then quite draining coming to work . . . there’s not that much reprieve”. (page 9 line 33)</p> <p>They said, you know, we’re not saying, you’ve got to come back to work, but you’ll be on unpaid leave. But I was in a position where I couldn’t go back to work because I had the three children at home. And ... I thought, actually, you know what this is indirect sex discrimination here, because even though they had taken everybody off [furlough] in a blanket way, the impact really was more on women, because it was women who are generally doing the majority of the childcare and who wouldn’t be able to come back.” (p. 1219, Line 5)</p> <p>“My work duties have suddenly been moved to the home, and my domestic duties have increased due to the COVID-19 lockdown. It is really difficult to separate the roles...for example, I will quickly leave a meeting (online) to attend to my children and then rush back to it; sometimes, I will be lost in the conversation because I have missed out on some minutes...it’s like a rollercoaster – crazy” (page 250, line, 24)</p> <p>“I just can’t cope, to be honest. Just working and managing children at the same time, indefinitely, it’s so hard. You can’t do anything.” (page 1222, line 8)</p> <p>“It [the work] hasn’t fallen equally in my house. And we’re both aware of that, but it comes down to how much we earn and who is the breadwinner, which in turn comes down to me having [had]children and time now to look after children.” (p.1219, line, 28)</p> <p>“As we know, women and men perform different familial and domestic roles. Even though we both foot the family bills, my husband doesn’t engage in what are termed “women’s duties”, such as cooking; bathing and caring for the kids; cleaning the house...all of these are considered women’s duties. Unfortunately, these duties and work responsibilities have all increased since the lockdown, and I have to attend to all of them” (p250, line 16)</p> <p>“I used to experience role conflict before the lockdown, but it has significantly worsened since the lockdown. My work and domestic duties have increased, and they are both happening in the same place [at home]. Sometimes, I lock myself up in a room to attend to my work duties, which my husband and children are really not happy about...and sometimes, I ignore work duties for a while to attend to my domestic duties...which also affects my work. I can’t separate the roles”. (p.250, line. 31)</p>	<p>(6)</p> <p>(1)</p> <p>(2)</p> <p>(1)</p> <p>(1)</p> <p>(2)</p> <p>(2)</p>	<p>(c.pr.i)</p> <p>(c.pr.i)</p> <p>(c.pr.i)</p> <p>(c.pr.i)</p> <p>(c.pr.i)</p> <p>(c.pr.i)</p> <p>(c.pr.i)</p>

d) Culture of Blame Feelings of guilt arising from this.	Public	<p>“Some also expressed frustration at the ‘culture of blame’ that they felt permeated the media and public discourse, which can be maladaptive and harmful for one’s own mental well-being” (Page 8, line 15)</p>	(4)	(d.pu.f)
		<p>“Will there be an expectation that the “heroes” we are celebrating (and their families) must take on an ever-increasing level of risk? If we can’t adequately ramp up capacity, and work conditions become intolerably dangerous, will the public turn on health workers who abandon their posts?” (page, 345, line 6)</p>	(6)	(d.pu.f)
		<p>“Consistent with research from previous pandemics and recent quantitative data during COVID-19, participants also restricted their news intake, particularly as they felt the constant reporting of COVID-19 and the prevalent discourse of blame negatively affected their mental health”.</p>	(4)	(d.pu.f)
		<p>The hero discourse often constructed nurses as “model citizens” in a rapidly evolving crisis that required responsibility, action, and, depending on one’s political perspective, obeying public authority. Nurses were often depicted as compliant with their role as the “last line of defense” in pandemic management, particularly in the uncertain early phases of the crisis. (page, 4, line 48)</p>	(3)	(d.pu.f)
	Private	<p>“I felt like I didn’t deserve that applause because I wasn’t on the frontline, and I wasn’t doing what I should be doing”. (Page, 10. Line 32)</p>	(6)	(d.pr.f)
		<p>“I felt incredibly guilty by the fact that I wasn’t helping out on the frontline because I was pregnant. I was just told I’m not allowed to see any patients, by occupational health, and sent home” (page 7, line 22)</p>	(4)	(d.pr.f)
		<p>“Because I’m working, he’ll just be watching stuff on his iPad, and so I feel bad about that.” (page, 1222, line 5)</p>	(1)	(d.pr.i)
		<p>“I’ve heard several times . . . ‘don’t use this now, we’re lucky we have PPE, all the trusts and all the hospitals don’t have it’ and then you just feel guilty because you know that the nurses aren’t protected somewhere else”. (page 6, line 53)</p>	(6)	(d.pr.f)
		<p>“When I first came off the rota, I just felt really guilty . . . Also, I’ve spent the last 9 years of my life training for this, and it was like why suddenly am I stepping away from this and it felt like I should be there” (page 10, line 33)</p>	(6)	(d.pr.f)

8. ANALYTICAL THEMES

8.1. *Psycho-social burden of being a care-giver conflicting socio-cultural and normative expectations on women as carers, workers, and citizens*

As illustrated in the descriptive themes above, public discourse in the UK during the COVID-19 lockdowns elevated formal and informal care givers who were predominantly women to the level of ‘heroes’ and ‘angels’. In sharp contrast, private discourse reveals how normative expectations of women, particularly mothers, created daunting levels of emotional and psychological stress. Here women who were also care-givers revealed how they struggled to cope with conflicting demands of domestic work, home schooling, working from home and/or working within health care or social care. Living up to public narratives which often placed caregivers in a heroic light was of itself an often isolating, and physically and emotionally demanding task.

You’ve got to be a superhero, you’ve got to look after your kids, you’ve got to manage the house, you’ve got to keep your husband out of the way, and get on with the other life that you normally do, which is working as well, and somehow fit it in. (p. 1226, line 20) (1)

Private discourse amongst female health care workers also revealed the internal tensions suffered by formal caregivers within the context of heroic narratives perpetuated across the UK media,

“The majority of NHS staff seem to be women and they are considered our heroes, but they don’t actually get funded”; “You know, don’t go ‘oh love,’ because it’s a bit patronising isn’t it, ah, you lovely nurse, you lovely carer, you’re going in there to look after the old people [...] and they’re potentially going to die on £6 an hour without a mask?”. (p. 1224, line 6) (1)

Tensions between heroic narratives amplified across media outlets and platforms in the UK and the psychological and social demands placed on women who were caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic also impacted significantly on personal and professional identity as the following quote from a health care worker reveals,

I’m a nurse. For myself, and many of my colleagues, our profession constitutes not just what we do, but who we are. Nurses remain vulnerable to hero discourses because our work is entangled with our identity. (p. 344, line 17) (5)

The intrinsic link between professional and personal identity experienced by this nurse is clearly evident in her words “its not just what we do, but who we are”. Here, feeling vulnerable to hero discourses reveals the extent to which nurses felt under pressure to live up to the heroic public narratives attached to their role by media outlets and platforms. Yet, as has been illustrated the pressures placed on women as formal and informal caregivers in balancing increased demands within the domestic sphere and work sphere placed increased stress on women as caregivers generally. For health and social care workers ‘heroism’ often entailed trying to ignore the risks associated with inadequate protective equipment or low staffing numbers (Hoerlke *et al.* 2021; Kim *et al.* 2021).

Will there be an expectation that the ‘heroes’ we are celebrating (and their families) must take on an ever-increasing level of risk? If we can’t adequately ramp up capacity, and work conditions become intolerably dangerous, will the public turn on health workers who abandon their posts? (p. 345, line 6) (6)

For those women who attempted to live up to this heroic and stoic narrative increased pressures within both formal and informal care giving was emotionally, mentally, and psychological challenging. Here, women working as informal carers often had to sacrifice paid work in the formal economy leading to a loss of identity. Additional anxieties related to the risks of the COVID-19 virus itself, financial worries and stresses related to home schooling often exacerbated this sense of loss or threats to professional and personal identities. From a biopsychosocial perspective several studies have underlined the relationship between a socially devalued self, perceived discriminations or threatened personal or professional identities and psychological and emotional wellbeing (Haslem *et al.* 2009; Sharma 2010; Garcia 2022; Lunt *et al.* 2022; OECD 2022).

8.2. *Women’s sense of powerlessness*

A central analytical theme emerging from across the descriptive themes was the sense of powerless expressed by women within private discourse. Here, feelings of lack of influence over decision making processes led to feelings of powerlessness for both formal and informal caregivers. For informal caregivers a number of recent studies have revealed ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly the lockdown periods have exacerbated gender differentials within the domestic sphere and across society in the UK. The following extracts clearly indicate the sense

of powerlessness and frustration felt by women who had to balance their role as informal caregivers and paid workers,

As we know, women and men perform different familial and domestic roles. Even though we both foot the family bills, my husband doesn't engage in what are termed 'women's duties', such as cooking; bathing and caring for the kids; cleaning the house [...] all of these are considered women's duties. Unfortunately, these duties and work responsibilities have all increased since the lockdown, and I have to attend to all of them. (p. 250, line 16) (2)

I used to experience role conflict before the lockdown, but it has significantly worsened since the lockdown. My work and domestic duties have increased, and they are both happening in the same place [at home]. Sometimes, I lock myself up in a room to attend to my work duties, which my husband and children are really not happy about [...] and sometimes, I ignore work duties for a while to attend to my domestic duties [...] which also affects my work. I can't separate the roles. (p. 250, line 31) (2)

For women juggling unpaid caring duties and paid work feelings of powerlessness and a lack of influence over decision making processes are also clearly evidenced within private discourse.

I was quite anxious about being in the office with COVID I had some colleagues of mine who were able to work from home [...] I was told that this wasn't possible [...] it was business as usual. It was a real sense of frustration, not feeling that you're being listened to by my manager and just a sense of feeling overwhelmed and quite helpless about the situation. (p. 6, line 46) (4)

The following quotation reveals a clear awareness of culturally defined gendered norms and forms of gendered discrimination underlying social roles in the UK.

They said, you know, we're not saying, you've got to come back to work, but you'll be on unpaid leave. But I was in a position where I couldn't go back to work because I had the three children at home. And [...] I thought, actually, you know what this is indirect sex discrimination here, because even though they had taken everybody off [furlough] in a blanket way, the impact really was more on women, because it was women who are generally doing the majority of the childcare and who wouldn't be able to come back. (p. 1219, line 5) (1)

For women within formal care-giving roles feelings of powerlessness were found to spill over into feelings of betrayal and guilt,

After eight weeks of clapping, I feel completely betrayed and as though what myself and my colleagues went through was just expected of us as our duty. (p. 5, line 44) (3)

A recent study conducted by Mabon *et al.* (2022) revealed the prevalence of feelings of powerlessness experienced by women who were health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, women working within health care settings described feeling as if they were “shouting into the ether” if they ever raised issues and concerns related to lack of PPE equipment and this left them feeling powerless.

Within a biopsychosocial conceptual model, feelings of powerlessness to control resources or decision-making processes within the workplace can lead to personal exhaustion and breakdown (Adams 2020; Sonali 2022; Tebbeb 2022; Weinberg and Creed 2022). This is particularly the case during times of crisis. Falcó-Pegueroles *et al.* (2023) found in a recent study that health care practitioners were more likely to focus on the suffering of others during the COVID-19 pandemic than their own well-being particularly regarding exhaustion and mental health issues. Moreover, as previously evidenced frustrations emerging from entrenched gendered norms often eclipsed women from being equally involved in decision making processes in the domestic and employment spheres. Recent international evidence has underlined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the structural limitations and culturally ascribed roles experienced by women and men. For women, “the motherhood penalty” has been found to be particularly significant for women during the COVID-19 pandemic. The motherhood penalty refers to the argument that a woman’s capacity to participate in paid work is strongly related to their responsibilities as unpaid caregivers. Similarly, a woman’s capacity to take on responsibilities as an unpaid caregiver is strongly related to her participation in paid work (Rathi and Chirantan 2023)

8.3. *Self-blame and guilt within a blame culture during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK*

Self-pathologizing and feelings of guilt within a blame culture emerged as a linking thread across all the descriptive themes. The tension between public discourse lauding stoicism and heroism and private discourse imbued with feelings of self-blame felt by women struggling to reconcile their identities as carers, workers and citizens was evident across all the descriptive themes. Here, traditional gendered roles became more entrenched during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK. For informal carer gives this was particularly acute for mothers who struggling to balance caring for children with the demands of employment.

As one mother expresses,

It's been difficult. I don't feel like I've been a good teacher in terms of I felt very unable to motivate them in the right way, to do their work in the ways that I would like them to do. It's all seemed a bit futile in places, so draining at home [...] and then quite draining coming to work [...] there's not that much reprieve. (p. 9, line 33) (6)

Echoing these feelings of guilt another mother describes her feelings of guilt when working from home during the pandemic,

Because I'm working, he'll just be watching stuff on his iPad, and so I feel bad about that. (p. 1222, line 5) (1)

For formal care givers feelings of guilt and self-blame were also evident across all descriptive themes. In particular, the impact of public discourses focussing on heroism and duty on the mental health of formal health care workers was also clearly demonstrated,

I've heard several times [...] "don't use this now, we're lucky we have PPE, all the trusts and all the hospitals don't have it" and then you just feel guilty because you know that the nurses aren't protected somewhere else. (p. 6, line 53) (6).

For this nurse feelings of guilt emerge from using personal protective equipment as it is in short supply and has been rationed across hospitals and health care centres.

Critically, these findings align closely with a burgeoning body of research evidence which reveals that the discourse of blame which permeated the public sphere in the UK during the COVID-19 lockdowns had a detrimental impact on mental health in general and most particularly on the mental health of health and social care workers generally (Greenburg 2020; Gilleen *et al.* 2021; Neil *et al.* 2021; San *et al.* 2021; Wanigasooriya *et al.* 2021). More broadly, the impact of feelings of self-blame and guilt experienced by women within formal and informal care-giving roles during the pandemic on short-term and long-term mental health has been demonstrated in several recent studies (Qureshi 2022).

There are clear intersections between the three analytical themes proposed in this section. In particular, the psycho-social burden of being a caregiver and conflicting socio-cultural and normative expectations on women as carers, workers and citizens is clearly evidenced as being related to feelings of powerlessness, self-blame, and guilt. Critically however, the relationship between these themes is also mediated by the specificities of cultural settings which generate gendered norms and socially ascribed

roles. As the findings of this chapter have shown, public and private discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates how socio-cultural factors become entrenched at times of crisis. In particular, the tension between media and news outlets and platforms which perpetuated a public discourse extolling the virtues of heroism and a private discourse characterised by feelings of guilt, powerlessness and self-blame led to internal contradictions for women as carers, workers, and citizens in the UK.

9. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The biopsychosocial pathways underlying the differential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of women and men in the UK are complex. Importantly however, the exploration of private and public discourse relating to the experiences of women who were formal and/or informal caregivers during the pandemic has provided some key insights into these pathways. In particular, the burden of normative expectations placed on women during lockdowns can be overwhelming with mothers facing overwhelming levels of emotional and psychological stress as they struggle to cope with conflicting demands of domestic work, home schooling, working from home and/or working within health care or social care. Moreover, a unifying thread across all three analytical themes was the extraordinary pressure of living up to public narratives of caregivers as stoic and heroic. The impact of the psychological, physical, and social burdens placed on caregivers in general and on women who made up the vast proportion of formal and informal caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK has been recently evidenced by a number of epidemiological studies. Here, as has been discussed previously, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated gendered health inequalities in the UK and across societies at global level (Wenham 2020; Del Río-Lozano *et al.* 2022; Stöckel and Bom 2022).

In recognition of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gendered health inequalities the World Health Organisation has urged investment in “quality gender responsive research on the potentially differential adverse health, social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on women and men” to enable the development of meaningful and responsive policies (WHO 2020). Recent health care policy strategy documents within the UK have endorsed the need to develop meaningful

and responsive policies. Exemplifying this, the *Women's Health Strategy for England* proposes,

a programme of work to support delivery of the Women's Health Strategy, eradicating deep-seated biases and driving forward the system-level changes needed to close the gender health gap. (*Women's Health Strategy for England* 2022, p. 8)

Within the strategy document a focus on gendered dimensions to mental health literacy is proposed.

This includes gendered dimensions to mental health literacy, such as improving the visibility of how mental ill health can stem from and interact with health conditions typically experienced by women across their life course. (*Womens Health Strategy for England* 2022, p. 33)

It may be argued that whilst this is a valuable focus in relation to health promotion, from a biopsychosocial perspective pathway which lead to poor mental health outcomes are also socially determined. As this chapter has evidenced it may be argued that the development of meaningful and responsive policies requires a commitment to understanding the complex pathways that lead to health inequalities.

Endorsing this perspective, the *Women's Health Strategy for Scotland* states that,

The Scottish Government recognises that across most aspects of mental health, outcomes for women and girls are poorer than for men and boys. That is why the Mental Health Transition and Recovery Plan, published in October 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, commits to making women and girls' mental health a priority. It sets out specific actions to address women and girls' mental health including engaging with women's organizations' to better understand and respond to the gender-related mental health inequalities that have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes for example, stressors and trauma experienced by women in key worker jobs and the disproportionate emotional and physical burden on women of caring for relatives of all ages. (*Women's Health Strategy for Scotland* 2022, p. 24)

It may be argued that the private discourses expressing the experience of women as caregivers provided in this chapter underlines the urgent need to engage with, listen to and hear women's voices to "better understand and respond to the gender-related mental health inequalities" and broader health, and socio-economic inequalities, "that have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic".

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Mimesis of the Zoom World

How TV Series Mirrored the 2020 Pandemic and Its Languages

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has made apparent the importance of stories in consoling, healing, and being effective vehicles of useful information. The two case studies taken into consideration in this work are TV series special episodes created and aired during the first phase of the pandemic, and particularly during the first lockdown. *Parks and Recreation's* and *Mythic Quest's* pandemic episodes portray their characters' interactions on line, mirroring the real world and the necessary but painful social distancing. These episodes were moving and have a great value as testaments of the lockdown, other than having proved helpful in raising charitable donations. Due to logistic restrictions and to the intention of portraying reality as it was, the two special episodes were realized through video calls and portray characters video calling each other.

Keywords: audio-visual languages; comedy series; Coronavirus; COVID-19; healing narrative; mimesis; *Mythic Quest*; pandemic narratives; *Parks and Recreation*; TV series.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF STORIES

There is nothing more powerful than a narrative. Several studies (for instance, Bower and Clark 1969; Haidt 2012; Dahlstrom 2014; Cometa 2017; Gottschall 2021) prove that a story is the easiest, more natural way of transmitting an information, that it fosters remembrance, and ultimately results in a deeper impact on its audience, to the point of influencing its choices.

From being a tool for memorising data – for instance in serial learning (Bower and Clark 1969) – to binding groups together, creating factions and even cults (Gottschall 2021), stories are a distinctive feature of humans – to the point that men and women can be defined as “storytelling animals” (Gottschall 2013). It is thanks to the ability of narrativizing the transmission of instructions that humanity have been capable of evolving (Cometa 2017), and through storytelling that science can still be communicated to nonexpert audiences (Dahlstrom 2014).

If the story paradox (Gottschall 2021) resides in a narrative’s capability of infecting brains with superstitions and dangerous beliefs, on the other hand, the art of storytelling has the potential of comforting people in stressful situations and even that of healing pain, apart from being useful in providing instructions as to recommended behaviours to face a crisis. Storytelling has a pivotal role in constructing one’s perception of self (as Haidt summarizes, “[biographical] narratives are not necessarily true stories; they are simplified and selective reconstructions of the past, often connected to an idealized vision of the future”, 2012; see also Eakin 1999).

In 2020, the most recent *annus horribilis* of humankind and the year of a whole generation’s biggest collective trauma, the COVID-19 pandemic, it was the incapability of making sense of the sudden global setback that worsened the astonishment of being threatened, as humankind, by an unknown, invisible menace (Mussgnug 2021; Puggioni 2023). The lack of a meaning and the uncertainty about the future characterized particularly the months of the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, from March to May 2020, a period in which a great part of humankind have been deprived of social contact and found itself locked in their houses as a measure to prevent a potentially uncontrollable contagion.

As in one of the *topoi* of dystopic narrative, the known social structure had been threatened, but contrary to the commonplace of post-apocalyptic stories, the world stood intact outside everyone’s homes – it was there, but out of reach. Not only was everything where it was bound to be, but, as in the title of an Italian documentary on the pandemic, *Fuori era primavera* (it was spring out there): everything was flourishing, and the springtime heath was wasted on everyone’s seclusion.

1.1. *The importance of stories during the pandemic*

The American organizational theorist Karl Weick defines a “cosmology episode” what occurs when “people suddenly and deeply feel that the

universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together” (Weick 1993, 633). Even if Weick’s analysis is referred to organizational catastrophes, it is useful to pinpoint a pivotal aspect of the larger scale “cosmology episode” occurred in 2020: “a cosmology episode feels like *vu jàdè* – the opposite of *déjà vu*: I’ve never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me” (*ibid.*, 633-634). In such an unprecedented context as the COVID-19 pandemic, different kind of narratives have been called into question in different ways both to try to make sense of what was happening, and to shorten the forced separateness, to overcome the seclusion. Stories have proven to be the means through which it was possible to try to make sense of reality in different ways: people both turned to pre-existing narratives that could serve as models, and wrote new stories in order to both process their unprecedented situation and to reassure other people, to try to heal their pain.

As to the resort to pre-existing narratives, in the attempt to find a paradigm in literature, the *Decameron* has often been quoted during the first lockdown in the first half of 2020 (Power 2020; Pratici e Vettori 2020) and still is called into question (for instance, Angeletti 2023): parallels have been made between the country *buen retiro* of the Boccaccio’s brigade in the XIV-century Tuscany, overshadowed by the Black death, and the contemporary lockdown. More consistently, humanity has turned to dystopic narratives (Mark 2022), recalling the literary transfiguration of a post pandemic world as in Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) or fishing out sci-fi stories that portrayed scenarios of seclusion as E.M. Forster’s *The Machine Stops* (1912): the former a short novel on the second generation of survivors in a world decimated by a mysterious disease, the latter a short story on an isolated humanity living under earth and whose fate is tied to a worshipped Machine. Movies and TV series have been consistently recalled during the first lockdown, in order to provide humanity for a frame that could support both a private and a collective sense of reassurance, a cathartic vision by safely witnessing the portrayal of characters that faced a menace and outcame it (Testoni *et al.* 2021). TreaAndrea Russworm, an associate professor of English who teaches dystopia in new media at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, during the peak of COVID-19 pandemic explained that “People are reaching out to dystopian tales to see what’s next. The impulse is to see how bad the situation can really get and ask yourself whether you could hypothetically survive that” (Chandran 2020). A

movie in particular, *Contagion* (2011), has been taken in consideration as almost prophetic, because it portrayed a pandemic and the consequent developing and releasing of a vaccine.

The second kind of appealing to narrative and stories during the pandemic, and the subject of this work, has been a creative one. Collections of short stories, novels and instant autofictions have been the creative outcome of the pandemic (Misra 2020), providing for the possibility to elaborate the trauma (for instance, the *Viral Imaginations: COVID-19* project: Mekel and Stetz 2022); audio-visual contents have also been realized, from those autonomously brought forth with a camera and an editing program or a remote editing crew – such as John Krasinski’s YouTube short series *Some Good News* (Alexander 2020), or, in Italy, Maccio Capatonda’s *Tg Casa 40ena* – to TV series revivals and/or special episodes. As to the latter, several obstacles had to be overcome, since the productive sector of audio-visual creativity had been almost entirely shut down by the impossibility of meeting and filming (Adgate 2021); but desperate times called for creative measures, and the logistic constraints have been encompassed in the story construction, becoming organically part of the diegesis. When the entire world was forced to transfer almost the entirety of their activities on line, the audio-visual narrative response to this scenario had to mirror reality: TV series and audio-visual fictional contents have been created according to the saying that what can’t be cured must be endured. If proximity was denied, it was in fiction as well as in reality.

2. TV SERIES AND A MIMETIC RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

Even if since the beginning of the Pandemic – and mostly during the first lockdown – art and culture have been a consolatory refuge and a response to the availability of unexpected and unwanted free time, artists seemed to be the workers that had been mostly endangered by the economic crisis caused by the pandemic (*Culture shock* 2020; Adgate 2021).

As a reaction to the contingent threat to the audio-visual creative sector, some screenwriters, directors, and actors committed to realizing revivals of largely appreciated shows, even those that had been already ended a few years ago; the outcomes were meant to entertain people during the lockdown and, at the same time, to raise awareness about the preventive behaviours recommended by health authorities (washing one’s hands, wearing a mask, and social distancing), and about the

necessity of charitable giving to humanitarian organizations. Comedy series in particular seemed to enhance in their pandemic episodes one of the features which have often distinguished them, i.e. a subterranean melancholy, almost always made explicit in the season finale, when the long-lasting acquaintance with beloved characters had to come to an end. Thanks to one of the specificities of comedy series, the prolonged familiarity with their casts (Rossini 2016; Barra 2020), they are the fictional equivalent of a safe place, and their characters a surrogate of an extended family; in a period in which there was literally no place apart from home, comedy series provided the otherwise impossible chance of paying a visit to an acquaintance, and revivals where the best way of getting together with one's connections – even if fictional ones. As Tanya Horeck noted in a paper called “Netflix and the Heal”, “‘Comfort TV’, or what in some quarters began to be designated as ‘kind TV’, while certainly not a new notion, took on a different import in the midst of a growing worldwide death toll and grim conditions of social isolation that saw people separated from loved ones and disconnected from their daily routines” (Horeck 2021).

Due to the writers' intention of portraying the reality as it was, without hypocrisy, during the 2020 first lockdown, and to the logistic restrictions, which couldn't allow to be otherwise, TV series revivals and special quarantine episodes depicted a socially distanced world, in which each character was in their home, and this separateness was not only encompassed but remarked in the diegesis. Even if the story was about the characters, their lives being consistent with the previous narrative, it was the *actors'* constraints that dictated the screenplay, and so, for instance, fictionally married couples had to be diegetically justified in being in different places; during the most difficult phase of the pandemic, the semiotics of characters and their narratives were strongly connected to the actors' bodies and lives, as theorized by Erica Fisher-Lichte (2008). As a result, TV series' pandemic episodes have been mostly characterized by the audio-visual version of a theatrical staging, each character delivering her piece in front of a camera, seemingly in direct dialogue with the audience but diegetically video-calling on other characters; on line conferences and multiple calls have been conveyed as a collage of frames in a split screen. Therefore, fictional interactions were similar to those of people all over the planet, massively using Zoom, and this mimesis included technical issues and people's clumsiness.

As stated in Eric Auerbach's seminal work *Mimesis* (2003), one of narrative's functions is that of mirroring reality; in audio-visual nar-

ratives, as well as in literature, the act of narrative construction can be either manifest or hidden, and consequently the gap between reality and its representation is either highlighted or ignored. The two specular rhetoric choices can be connected to Bolter and Grusin's theorization (in *Remediation* 2001) of the opposing pairs: opaqueness vs transparency, hyper-mediation vs immediacy: opaqueness and hyper-mediation are referred to the choice of reaffirming the fictional nature of a content by constantly reminding the audience of being in front of a medium, assisting to a performance; on the opposite, transparency and immediacy tend to make the audience forget about the medium, and pretend to give them unmediated access to reality.

By forcing the shift of all human interactions on line, the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced what already was a tendency of the digital world, that is the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction. The two case studies of this work are comedy series episodes produced during the first pandemic quarantine: they mirror reality hyper-mediated as it was, and by doing so are transparent in their depiction of social interactions during the lockdown: both narrative and reality almost entirely existed on screen, and human interactions were performed through windows on computers.

2.1. *A pandemic revival: "Parks and Recreation"*

Parks and Recreation special episode aired in April 2020, five years after its final episode and during the first phase of COVID-19 pandemic, when most countries' people were experiencing the trauma of a lockdown. A mockumentary sitcom about an office in the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana, *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015, NBC) starred Amy Poehler as the always optimistic character Leslie Knope, deputy director in an office full of co-workers that she motivates with her unshakable enthusiasm. The arc of transformation of her character had led her to finally being President of the United States, and the series ended as a parable about merit over calculus, with flash-forwards about each character of the show. The pandemic special episode has consequently been written as a revival, that is a narrative reprise of a TV series which had been concluded or cancelled (Brooks and Marsh 2003); it usually involves most of the original cast, and is diegetically coherent to the original series' narrative, encompassing the real-life time span meanwhile occurred.

Always focused on good intentions and the importance of friendship, *Parks and Recreation's* special reunion episode is no exception, in

of responsibility and generosity. Coherently with the focus on the necessity of togetherness and the importance of checking one's emotive wellness, the episode also promotes the National Alliance on Mental Illness, inviting the audience to check on supporting bodies. Within a month from its release (Hersko 2020) the *Parks and Recreation* revival succeeded in raising 3 million dollars for Feeding America: a tangible outcome for the call of fictional characters, and the prove that stories can impact on the real world (Fig. 3).



Figures 1-2. – Still images from “Park and Recreation”’s revival episode.



Figure 3. – Paul Rudd as Bobby Newport asking for donations.

As an episode of a comedy series, even if set during a pandemic, the *Parks and Recreation* revival encompasses several humorous gags, even if sometimes the result could have been darker than intended: when simpleton Andy Dwyer is invited to speak to children as his alter ego Johnny Karate, he advises them to wash their hands, but then his optimistic message turns in: “Things will go back to normal, they just have to, and it may not be today, it may not be tomorrow, and it may not be next week, may not be a year, or a hundred years, or a thousand years, *it may never happen*, but it will eventually”. A joke from a consistently and comically incongruous character, it is now, from a safe position, tangible evidence of the uncertainty all humanity was facing during the days in which the show was filmed and made available.



Figure 4. – The cast of the revival of “Parks and Recreation” at the end of the episode.

The episode ends with the *Parks and Recreation* cast unanimously singing the *Lil' Sebastian (Five Hundred Candles in the Wind)*, a running song through the show, a eulogy to the eponymous fictional beloved pony. Once more, both cast and characters try to overcome the separateness between each other and with the audience. Singing together, however in a distance and a bad cover to Elton Johns, may have lifted the spirit (Fig. 4).

2.2. *A quarantine special episode: "Mythic Quest"*

A most recent and ongoing TV series, *Mythic Quest* (2020-, Apple TV+) released in May 2020 a special episode called *Quarantine*. The series had only premiered three months earlier, on February 7, 2020, with the simultaneous release of the nine episodes of the first season. The series follows the events of the studio in which is produced the beloved fictional Massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) of the same name of the series. The first season had been focused on the interpersonal dynamics between some key figures of the production studio, mostly the creative director Ian Grimm (Rob McElhenney), the lead engineer Poppy Li (Charlotte Nicdao), and the head of monetization Brad Bakshi (Danny Pudi) before the launch of a game expansion called *Raven's Banquet*. In the first season finale episode, Poppy Li released a virus called "Blood Ocean" in the game world; as the fictional executive producer David Brittlesbee (played by David Hornsby) notes in the quarantine episode, "Releasing a disease into the game right before a global pandemic was not a great look".

The quarantine episode was written and realized after the production of the second season had been shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic; it was started and finished in three weeks despite the several constraints of the lockdown, and realized using 40 iPhones and 20 sets of AirPods, with each tool sent to the cast, that also had to download programs and follow instructions as to filming and even dressing; Rob McElhenney – who, other to play the lead character Ian is also one of the creator of the show, explains that

Once they had the hardware on hand, the *Mythic Quest* team had the actors install prosumer-grade filming apps on the phones, including FilmicPro (the video software recommended by *Mythic Quest* cinematographer Mike Berlucchi) and MOTIV (for audio recording), and sent them all external Shure mics. They consulted remotely with the actors over FaceTime or

Zoom to location scout within their own houses. “We would walk around the house and figure out where’s the best place to set the cameras, where’s the best place for sound, and what’s the best time of day, because we’re using natural light,” McElhenney said. (McHenry 2020)

The quarantine episode, as well as the *Parks and Recreation*’s one, mimetically portrays a series of video calls between the characters, that are co-workers but also feel affection for each other, even if only in an embryonal phase. Since this is a young series, and was only at its first season in May 2020, the relationships between the characters were far from being resolved and were mostly conflictual, which is encompassed in the special episode. Brad and David’s conflict, for instance, emerges as the characters engage a Street Fighter challenge that ends in a substantial charity donation – and in the cutting of the loser’s iconic moustache (*Fig. 5*).



Figure 5. – The Street Fighter challenge between two characters.

The mimetic portrayal of video calls provided also for the possibility of coherently inserting the comic relief which typifies a comedy series, since the head writer of the game Longbottom (F. Murray Abraham) isn’t capable of using any technological device, and then he accidentally sets on phone filters and slows down every exchange, using different platforms at the same time and addressing his texts to everyone. The phatic function of language (Jakobson 1960) is often used when communicating on a new medium, especially one that is not well mastered; in the *Mythic Quest* special quarantine episode, Longbottom typifies the clumsy user of a technology, always asking if he can be seen even if he has shut down the camera (*Fig. 6*).



Figure 6. – Longbottom’s clumsiness in the “Mythic Quest” pandemic episode.

Apart from the efforts of maintaining the comic tone, the episode’s writers chose to portray the characters’ weaknesses and a mental breakdown. Creator and actor Rob McElhenney explained: “We wanted to tell a story that was authentic to the experiences that people [were] going through [that time], and also, we didn’t want to do 30 minutes of Zoom jokes” (McHenry 2020). The episode not only portrays the fear of going outside his house of co-protagonist Ian Grimm (Rob McElhenney), but also the emotional crisis of main character Poppy Li (Charlotte Nicdao), who starts burying herself in work (in order to provide a fictional vaccine for the “Blood Ocean” in-game disease) and then melts down (“All my family are thousands of miles away, and I don’t have any friends”, she admits) (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. – Poppy Li’s mental breakdown.

At the end of the episode, an agoraphobic Ian knocks at Poppy Li’s door to hug her even through a mask and a full coverage jogging suit. It is useful to highlight once again that the original airing of the episode was

pivotal in reaching the maximum effect: when watched during the lockdown, this scene had a huge impact on a socially deprived audience. As Brian Grubb wrote in an immediate review, “The whole thing was a triumph of storytelling and capturing a moment in a human way” (Grubb 2020).



Figure 8. – Happy characters after the Rube Goldberg performance.

As in the *Parks and Recreation* special episode, the *Mythic Quest*'s quarantine episode also ends with a with a collective activity simultaneously performed by all the characters; in this case, a Rube Goldberg performance, that is an unnecessarily complicated choreography to perform a simple act (in this case, pretending to hand a chip from one screen to another); the effort is coordinate to simulate the unity of space, even if a virtual one. With the galvanising musical accompaniment of *Rocky*'s title track, through all the windows of the split screen a chip is handed from one character to another, and its transition from each one of the character's screens is set as Baroquely as possible, and requested a perfect coordination – at least a fictional one –; with Longbottom's screen black until the very last minute, jeopardizing the success of the challenge. It was a moving yet funny ending when seen in a time in which the audience was experiencing solitude and separateness, and a document of what was like to live during a major collective and individual crisis; “I suspect it marked the first time I have ever cried a little while watching someone eat a single chip” wrote Grubb (2020) (*Fig. 8*).

On April 16, 2021 aired a second special episode, called *Everlight*. The period was still full of uncertainties about the future, with cyclic reprises of the pandemic and the constant threat of new, more aggressive variants of the COVID-19 virus, and *Everlight* staged a festive office meeting, which had seemed almost impossible a few months ago, and was intended to give hope in the reprise of a normal life. As McElhenney explained,

We wanted to put it in our rear-view mirror, so we broke an entire season of television that projects sometime in the future when the pandemic is a thing of the past. That said, we recognized we couldn't move on without at least acknowledging the fact that that transition would be difficult, which is why we made the standalone episode, 'Everlight'. (Weiss 2021)

2.3. *Minor revivals*

Other public figures step back in their beloved characters' shoes for the benefit of their public, even if in less structured narratives than *Park and Recreation's* and *Mythic Quest's* ones. *Community's* cast was reunited for a re-reading of one of its episodes' screenplays, with the purpose of benefitting World Central Kitchen and Frontline Foods. *Community* is a TV series which portrayed a heterogeneous and mismatched study group in The Greendale Community College; the show had ended in 2015, but on May, 18 2020, when in Italy the lockdown had just become less strict, actors and actresses joined the remote yet simultaneous reading of the script of *Cooperative Polygraphy* (season 5, episode 4). Actor and rapper Donald Glover reunited with the cast for the occasion after having left the series during the penultimate season, and Pedro Pascal guest starred also. The episode was followed by a Q&A session and a podcast, "Which, as a fan, are both enjoyable and almost *therapeutic* to watch because it was just like seeing the beloved study group together again after all these years" (Clement 2020; emphasis added); in just two days, the reunion raised over one hundred thousand dollars for charity and had over 1.5 million views (*ibidem*) (Fig. 9).

In a still less structured way, *The Office's* cast reunited to congratulate on the marriage of two fans; they were hosted in John Krasinski's *Some Good News*; the series run from 2005 to 2013.

As a contribution in raising awareness on the importance of prevention, *How I Met Your Mother* actress Cobie Smulders shot a video in which reminded the audience to stay at home. It was a new live version

of the fake music video *Let's Go to the Mall*, originally part of the comedy *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014) and performed in a piano version during the quarantine: in the 2020 edition, the lyric was changed in *Let's All Stay at Home*, and contained the lines "I have to go do Zoom school soon, / at least until we're all immune, / but that's just fine, / I'm gonna follow COVID guidelines" (Weisholtz 2020).



Figure 9. – The “Community” reunion.

3. CONCLUSION

Stories during the pandemic have been consolatory and useful; they provided for horizons of meaning when everything was uncertain, they functioned as a surrogate social life, and conveyed practical information on suggested behaviours to prevent an uncontrollable contagion and on the necessity of charitable donations to help those in need.

As a tool to interpret reality (Testoni *et al.* 2021), movies and TV series helped coping with a “vu jàdé” (Weik 1993, 633), an unprecedented situation. Not only the familiarity with characters engaged in the special reprise of their narrative provided relief, but the shows were vehicles of information, since, as Lucretius put it, it is useful to sweeten with honey the cup of the medicine. Narrative can sweeten information and make it more digestible and effective, if being what makes us human isn't enough.

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Sense-Making/Giving during the COVID-19 Crisis

A Multi-Method Study of Health Podcasting
in Australia and the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Sense-making and sense-giving represent an issue of communication (Weick *et al.* 2005). The former is associated with emotional processes of crisis assessment and cognitive processes of justifying and seeking social acceptance for decisions (Søderberg and Vaara 2003), while the latter is the framework communicated to the public to facilitate their understanding and subsequently motivate certain actions (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). The medium used to communicate this framework varies depending on the relationship an authority figure has with their audience. Analysis of this communication and its medium has focused primarily on political leaders through the lens of the Charismatic, Ideological and Pragmatic (CIP) model (Crayne and Medeiros 2020), and of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Wodak 2021). This study uses both the CIP model and the DHA via Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) to examine influential physicians communicating the COVID-19 crisis in health podcasts in the U.S. and Australia. It therefore interprets the health-related information they disseminate, and how this information is framed and given meaning, to develop a perspective on how and why these podcasters differ in how they make sense of the crisis and, consequently, appeal to a broader audience.

* Although this research was jointly conducted by both Authors, Rosita Belinda Maglie is responsible for the Abstract and the sections 1, 1.3 and 3; Matthew Josef Groicher for the sections 1.2, 2, and 4.

Keywords: CADS; CIP Model; COVID-19 crisis communication; DHA; podcasting; sense-making/giving.

1. INTRODUCTION

It would be reasonable to expect that the ubiquity of the COVID-19 threat would lead to a seemingly unified response from world leaders. However, this has not been the case. Global responses to the COVID-19 crisis have varied markedly, leading to substantially different outcomes in terms of virus mitigation, population health, and economic stability. One explanation for this inconsistency is that political leaders took differential approaches to making sense of the crisis, which, in turn, influenced their approaches to decision making and communication. Depending on each country's sociopolitical context, history, collective memories and traumas, and historical tradition of government rhetoric, apart from the personality of the head of state and the nature of the governmental system, most governments used specific forms of crisis communication to convince people to take restrictive measures because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Wodak 2021, 346). Thus, the varied and damaging initial responses of many heads of state ranged from quick social and economic interventions (e.g., Kealey 2020) to downplaying the severity of the virus and deflecting responsibility (e.g., Phillips 2020) to claiming the virus was a “hoax” (e.g., Egan 2020), and as a result left many people around the world scared, angry, uncertain, and lacking confidence in their national leaders (*The Lancet* 2020, 1011).

So far, the Charismatic, Ideological, and Pragmatic (CIP) model of leadership (Crayne and Medeiros 2021), and Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) (Wodak 2021) have separately addressed the constructs of sensemaking and sensegiving of the COVID-19 crisis, mainly focusing their attention on political leaders in order to identify their leadership styles and their specific modes of communication in press conferences and interviews. Looking at Europe, Ruth Wodak (2021) presents the results of a comparative and qualitative discourse-historical analysis of crisis communication by governments in Austria, Germany, France, Hungary, and Sweden during the global COVID-19 pandemic lockdown from March 2020 to May 2020. Four frames are discussed – resurrection, dialog, trust, and war – that, pointing to distinct regimes of bio- and body politics legitimated in very different ways, illustrate diverse ways of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. In Austria, for instance, the nation

was conceptualized as a family, with a quasi-Messiah as leader (338-340). Crisis communication by heads of state, like former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, consisted of speaking at eye level with their people, and establishing a rational dialog and an engaged relationship – full of empathy – with citizens (340-341). In Sweden, where full lockdown never occurred, the strategy for containing the virus entailed a trust model that implied personal responsibility rather than hierarchical leadership (342-343). The fourth frame, used for example by Hungarian Prime Minister Orban in public speeches, interviews, and press conferences, was based on the metaphor of “war against the virus”, meaning that in emergency situations, leaders bear all the responsibility and people must follow orders (344-345).

Using the CIP model of leadership (Mumford 2006, as cited in Hunter *et al.* 2011, 72) as a framework, Crayne and Medeiros (2021) discuss the concept of the leader as sense-maker to understand the different responses of three leaders to COVID-19: Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, Jair Bolsonaro, the former Brazilian President, and Angela Merkel. As already mentioned in the above study, Angela Merkel’s rational communication about the virus, which was based on scientific evidence, was also confirmed by the two authors (468). Merkel foregrounded her pragmatism when she appealed to the rationality of the German public rather than their emotions. Moreover, her appeals to the public focused heavily on the present and avoided speculation about a return to normalcy or aspects of the future (469). In his response to COVID-19, Bolsonaro struck a negative tone by focusing on the past and portraying the virus as an “us versus them” problem. According to Crayne and Medeiros (2021, 468), his behavior exhibits some of the most predictable results of ideological sensemaking, such as strict adherence to values, demands for loyalty, and rejection of information and people who contradict the thematic narrative. Trudeau’s approach to Canada’s COVID-19 response was largely charismatic. His communication with the public, whom he viewed as primary agents in crisis management, was clearly optimistic and focused on a post-pandemic future (465) and the successful development of coalitions (466).

In our modern age, however, politicians are not the only authority figures whose voices are echoed across nations. Their opinions and messages are taken up and modified by broadcasters of various types – radio, television, social media and podcasts – who in turn have an impact on their audiences’ understanding of crisis situations. Differently from previous studies, the present research extends our understanding of

crisis communication, modifies its meaning-making medium, and uses the CIP model, DHA and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) through text analysis software (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count – LIWC 2022; Boyd *et al.* 2022; and WordSmith Tools, version 7, Scott 2016) to examine influential physicians’ communication via health podcasts in the United States (i.e., Dr. Sanjay Gupta in *Coronavirus: Fact vs. Fiction*) and in Australia (i.e., Dr. Norman Swan in *Coronacast*). Like policy makers, lay people trust these podcasters to make sense of the sometimes-overwhelming amount of information available and to provide a clear path amid uncertainty. Therefore, this study interprets the health-related information these authorities disseminate via podcasts, as well as the ways in which this information is framed and given meaning, to develop a perspective on how and why the various mental, cultural, and political models of these podcasters differ in how they make sense of the COVID-19 crisis and, consequently, appeal to a broader audience.

Because it is based on DHA, this investigation avoids disciplinary limitations (Wodak and Reisigl 2016, 57) and applies the DHA and CIP models in a combined approach to analyze this new communication medium, i.e., podcasting, by focusing on two examples of podcast series broadcast on two different continents, and new leaders, i.e., physicians hosting podcast series dedicated to daily coverage of COVID-19, in this case Sanjay Gupta from the U.S. and Norman Swan from Australia. Since DHA also considers triangulation important to capture many different facets of the object of study (Wodak and Reisigl 2016, 58), this study also combines the two approaches with CADS, to better intertwine Corpus Linguistics (CL) with discourse analysis in the DHA framework, through text analysis tools. More specifically, it studies the main features of leadership styles, included in the CIP model, as discursive features identified in the ad-hoc assembled corpora consisting of the two podcasts under study, using two text analysis tools: Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) (Boyd *et al.* 2022) and WordSmith Tools (Scott 2016). Thirdly, due to the fact that DHA focuses mainly on historical analysis to provide an explanation for discursive change, so that the results can be practically used for emancipatory and democratic purposes (Wodak and Reisigl 2016, 58), the ultimate goal of this study is to use both approaches and tools to better understand whether the podcasts analyzed in this study can be considered potentially good examples of podcast programs on COVID-19 that, as the WHO (2021, 55) recommends, can strengthen public trust in digital health to properly address vaccine hesi-

tancy, improve public understanding, and promote public adherence to treatment recommendations.

In the following sections, we outline the theoretical underpinnings of our research and provide a definition of sensemaking and sensegiving according to the theoretical framework of the CIP leadership model and a description of DHA, CADS, and CL. We then describe the relevant methods of data collection and analysis, and present the results obtained. The paper concludes by reviewing the above goals, pointing out methodological limitations, and discussing opportunities for future research.

1.1. *Sensemaking and sensegiving*

Sensemaking and sensegiving are two key processes carried out by leaders in changing environments and times of crisis, such as that created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Sensemaking is the retrospective process through which leaders make sense of, or interpret, events. By looking backwards at past occurrences, leaders develop a narrative that explains events. This is then used as a basis and justification for future decisions, i.e., a prescriptive model. The efficacy of this model and its consistency with the situation at hand are essential, since an inadequate model can further complicate crisis conditions, as the basis for a group's problem solving becomes flawed (Crayne and Medeiros 2021, 463).

Sensegiving, on the other hand, refers to the way the prescriptive model is conveyed by authorities to their followers, as well as the medium used to communicate it. Examples can include press conferences or public statements. The communication of this model to all followers provides them with a common framework through which they can interpret new events, allowing the group to function more cohesively to confront and overcome problems (Crayne and Medeiros 2021, 464).

The Charismatic, Ideological and Pragmatic Model of leadership, or CIP model, proposes three sensemaking-driven styles of leadership, each with a unique method of forming and communicating perspectives on events. Differences between styles are most easily observed during periods of crisis, which are managed differently based on the leader's prevalent style. The three styles are distinguished by at least eight characteristics, specifically (1) time frame orientation, (2) type of experience used, (3) number and type of outcomes sought, (4) focus in model construction, (5) locus of causation, (6) controllability of causation, (7) targets of influence, and (8) the crisis conditions that have been associated with

optimal performance of this type of leader. It has also been suggested that each type of leader varies in the type of emotions (or lack thereof) they employ in the communication of their models (Mumford 2006, as cited in Hunter *et al.* 2011, 72). See *Table 1* for a summary of these characteristics.

Table 1. – Summary of CIP model characteristics and differences between leader types. Source: Hunter et al. 2011, 72.

	CHARISMATIC	IDEOLOGICAL	PRAGMATIC
Time frame orientation	future	past	present
Type of experience used	positive	negative	both
Nature of outcomes sought	positive	transcendent	malleable
Number of outcomes sought	multiple	few	variable
Focus in model construction	external	internal	external
Locus of causation	people	situations	interactive
Controllability of causation	high	low	selective
Targets of influence	masses	base cadre	elites
Crisis conditions	ordered	chaotic	localized
Use of emotions	positive	negative	rational (low emotion)

Charismatic leaders tend to focus on the future when forming prescriptive models (time frame orientation). They utilize positive events as reference (type of experience used) and seek multiple positive outcomes for their followers (number and type of outcomes sought). Their focus in model construction is frequently external, while the locus of causation is situated in people and their actions. Thus, they also perceive a high level of control over the causes of the changes they seek. Their targets are the masses, whom they seek to influence to change their behavior in a certain way in order to achieve their goals. These leaders operate best in ordered environments where they can focus on swaying people’s visions to reflect their own. They also tend to employ positive emotions when communicating with their followers (Hunter *et al.* 2011, 72; Crayne and Medeiros 2021, 465).

Ideological leaders, on the other hand, utilize negative emotions such as anger more frequently in their communication, focusing on learning from past mistakes (time frame orientation) and negative experiences (type of experience used). They pursue few, transcendent goals of a return to traditional values and past glory (number and type of outcomes

sought) with a small group of followers (target of influence) and largely attribute control over current events to external forces such as the situation (locus of causation). They are often in their element when chaotic conditions prevail, where their strongly held beliefs and past-oriented perspective can provide stability and guidance (Hunter *et al.* 2011, 72-73; Crayne and Medeiros 2021, 467).

Finally, pragmatic leaders are highly rational in their communication, foregoing the use of emotions in favor of logical arguments and persuasive tactics to convince highly skilled members of society (target of influence), who are the only ones fully capable of understanding the complexity of the current situation (time frame orientation), to collaborate to solve current problems (nature of outcomes sought). Consequently, their perspective tends to be much narrower, focusing on selected issues that require attention, drawing on the experiences necessary to best address the situation at hand (type of experience used). Their goals may also change as the problem evolves. These leaders are best situated in localized, stable conditions where concrete problems can be identified and solved in a rational process (Bedell-Avers, Hunter, and Mumford 2008, 91; Hunter *et al.* 2011, 72-73; Crayne and Medeiros 2021, 468).

These three styles are not meant to be rigid, and some overlap is possible. Leaders are thought to incorporate aspects of different styles into their sensemaking, but prevalently choose one pathway. For example, a pragmatic leader may on occasion focus on future goals, or employ both positive and negative emotions as necessary, while generally remaining more problem-focused and rational than other styles. Furthermore, it should be noted that none of the styles are considered superior to the others; all are valid strategies and may excel or not based on the situation in which a given leader-figure finds themselves (Crayne and Medeiros 2021, 464).

1.2. *Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) and Corpus Linguistics (CL)*

The Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) provided the analytical framework for this study by helping to deconstruct the language of the two health authorities who appeared as experts on two podcasts aired in two different countries, to examine leadership style to gain insight into their emotional and cognitive processes of making sense of the COVID-

19 crisis that is given/communicated to the audience, and to identify potentially good examples of podcast programs that can strengthen public trust in digital health technologies.

DHA usually consists of an eight-step program (Wodak and Reisigl 2016, 33), and the investigation presented here followed all steps recursively:

- activating and consulting prior theoretical knowledge (in our case, reading and discussing previous research on the CIP model of leadership, DHA, CADS and CL);
- systematically collecting data and contextual information (in accordance with the research hypotheses, analyzing the discourse of crisis communication and, in particular, the discursive events associated with COVID-19, communicated by healthcare authorities in Australia and in the US through the medium of podcast);
- selecting and preparing data for specific analysis (following predetermined criteria, selecting the two health podcasts, limiting data collection to one month, and transcribing the episodes);
- defining research question(s) and formulating assumptions (based on literature review and initial review of data);
- qualitative pilot analysis, including contextual analysis, macro/micro-analysis (compiling a pilot corpus allows testing of categories, i.e., leadership styles, and initial assumptions, and further specification of assumptions);
- detailed case studies (using a larger corpus, proceeding primarily quantitatively but also qualitatively), formulation of a critique (interpreting and explaining the results, taking into account relevant contextual knowledge and referring mainly to the last of the three dimensions of the critique)²; and
- practical application of the analysis results (the results are proposed for practical application to promote trust in online health communication and acceptance of health protocols).

Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) is a good ally for a DHA study, and both ought to benefit from their theoretical and methodologi-

² Text or Discourse Immanent Critique aims at uncovering inconsistencies, (self-) contradictions, paradoxes and dilemmas in text/discourse-internal structures; Socio-Diagnostic Critique is about uncovering the – especially latent – persuasive or ‘manipulative’ character of discursive practices, and Future-Related Prospective Critique aims at improving communication (e.g., by developing policies against sexist language use or by breaking down ‘language barriers’ in hospitals, schools, etc.) (Wodak and Reisigl 2016, 26).

cal cross-fertilization to examine language use in a social context, as we believe that a triangulated design helps to validate and enrich the analysis of language in the light of historical, socio-cultural, and political insights (Gillins *et al.* 2023, 7). CADS falls into the mixed-method category because it already connects Corpus Linguistics (CL) and Discourse Analysis (DS). Ideally, this approach combines the empirical robustness of the corpus-based strand with the insightful depth of the discourse analytic strand (Gillins *et al.* 2023, 49).

Indeed, CL allows critical discourse analysts to work with much larger data sets than is possible with purely manual techniques. By enabling critical discourse analysts to broaden their empirical base considerably, CL can help reduce researcher bias (Mautner 2016, 155) and thus address a problem to which Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in general, and DHA in particular, is hardly more prone than other social sciences, but for which it has been harshly and persistently criticized (e.g., Widdowson 2004). As concerns this study, CL within CADS allowed us to work with a large amount of data and to look closely at linguistic details and their collocational environment (McEnery and Hardie 2012, 233). CL software provides not only quantitative perspectives on authentic texts used in various contexts to perform social functions, e.g., calculating frequencies and measures of statistical significance, but more importantly qualitative perspectives, insofar as it presents data excerpts in a way that allows the researcher to evaluate individual occurrences of search words, qualitatively examine their collocation environments, describe salient semantic patterns, and identify discourse functions (Mautner 2016, 155). Doing so critically means uncovering and “challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about language and the social, as well as recognizing discourse as a potentially powerful agent in social change” (157).

Following CADS work on linguistic signs, we focused our analysis of the concordance line less on what signs are and how they relate to each other, and more on what they do and how they relate to the extra-linguistic world (Gillins *et al.* 2023, 23). In this study, in fact, we were less interested in the syntactic position of a word for its own sake than in whether syntactic position says anything about the speakers’ leadership styles (e.g., whether the health podcasters studied are predominantly charismatic, ideological, or pragmatic); we were less interested in the range of meanings of a word than in how those meanings were constructed and reinforced by the podcasters in their particular discourse context. Moreover, because of CADS interest in the social function of language, we looked

beyond the concordance line. First, we read and interpreted not only the line itself, but also an extended section of the co-text before and after that line as needed³. Indeed, CADS scholarship uses concordance as a window through which to access complete texts (23). Then, as we expanded it, we related the concordance line to the broader socio-historical context that shapes and is shaped by the corpus.

The following section focuses on describing the corpus design criteria followed in this study, the software packages used, and the resulting features (e.g., frequency lists) and types of linguistic evidence (e.g., concordance lines) provided by the text analysis tools that, as McEnery and Hardie (2012, 233) point out, were considered in the spirit of triangulation, i.e., in a methodologically pluralistic approach. Because one of the two Authors has a background in psychology and is familiar with LIWC (Pennebaker *et al.* 2007), which was originally developed for analyzing narratives of emotional distress, this section also describes this text analysis program, which was used as an additional method for a quantitative approach to examining the language of public health crisis communication through podcasting, and which was added to the software Word-Smith Tools commonly used in CL studies (e.g., Baker 2006; Hunt and Brooks 2020).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Two podcasts from different countries, but with similar characteristics (i.e., both main hosts are physicians with seemingly similar perspectives on COVID-19), comprise the corpus, which includes 52 episodes broadcast on the same dates during the global lockdown, i.e., April 2, 2020, to May 19, 2020. Of these, 26 belonged to the podcast program *Coronavirus: Facts vs. Fiction* (46,929 running words) hosted by Sanjay Gupta, the American celebrity physician and CNN Chief Medical Correspondent; and the remaining 26 belonged to the Australian podcast *Coronacast* (52,993 running words) hosted by Dr Norman Swan, one of Australia's most medically qualified journalists, and Tegan Taylor, a health and science reporter.

³ For word-limitation reasons, the examples from the corpus in this study are limited to a few lines.

In line with the procedures outlined by the DHA, we followed a multimethod approach to reach our objectives. Four of the nine characteristics outlined in the CIP model were selected for analysis in this study. This selection was based in part on the literature, which identifies four traits (i.e., use of emotions, time-frame orientation, outcomes sought and locus of causation) as the most easily identifiable in discourse (Crayne and Medeiros 2021, 464). In our study, however, we chose to analyze the targets of each podcaster's influence rather than the outcomes sought because we assumed that the targets could be identified by analyzing the text. Therefore, we decided to examine time frame orientation, locus of causation, targets of influence, and use of emotions.

For data analysis, we used two tools, i.e., the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, or LIWC, and WordSmith Tools. These tools offered us both a broad overview of the corpus with quantitative data and more in-depth contextual information. After initial examination with LIWC, we made further hypotheses that we investigated in more detail with WordSmith Tools.

To be precise, the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count is a tool that applies text-based analysis to assign words in a given text to specific categories of psychological states, functions or thinking styles, as well as assigning lexicogrammatical labels, which are presented as relative frequencies (Boyd *et al.* 2022, 2-3). It has been used in many studies and several versions exist, including the one released in 2022, but it has also been heavily criticized since words are not used in isolation and require context to adequately evaluate their meaning (Hunt and Brooks 2020, 21).

In CADS, the frequency of an item or structure is taken to be one of the key indicators of its significance, the WordSmith Tools software package, useful for searching for lexicogrammatical and word patterns in corpora, allows for various analytical functions, including wordlist and concordance line analysis, insofar as recurring words and phrases can function as indicators of specific ways of representing and making sense of the world (Baker 2014, 13). For this study, we exclusively used it to first obtain an immediate snapshot of the characteristics of each podcaster's language pattern through the wordlist function, and then to perform a frequency-based analysis using the concordance function that facilitates close examination of recurring patterns of use.

Examining the existing literature, we compiled a list of linguistic features that have been found to be associated with selected CIP model categories. Again, only features that could, in theory, be located using the selected text analysis tools were considered. The resulting list, which was

used as the basis for corpus analysis, consisted of LIWC features linked to certain thinking styles, and words selected based on their association with indicators of specific features or thinking styles. The features, words, and related studies are listed in *Table 2*.

Table 2. – CIP model characteristics and chosen indicators along with supporting literature.

CIP CHARACTERISTIC	LIWC CATEGORY ASSOCIATED	WORDS EXAMINED WITH WORDSMITH TOOLS	SUPPORTING LITERATURE ⁴
Use of emotions ⁵	emo_pos, emo_neg, cogproc	think, know	Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010, 32; Boyd <i>et al.</i> 2022, 11
Time frame orientation	focuspast, focuspresent, focusfuture	will, back, now	Boyd <i>et al.</i> 2022, 11
Locus of causation	i, we, you, ipron	very, really, think, know, get, other, people, us, we, virus	Rouhizadeh <i>et al.</i> 2018, 1149-1150
Targets of influence	i, we, you, ipron, prosoc	you, we, they, I, them, us	none

As shown in *Table 2*, not all CIP model traits could be examined with a single tool; a combination of two tools was necessary to fully describe each feature. The use of emotional versus logical appeals in communication (Crayne and Medeiros 2021, 464) was analyzed via both LIWC and WordSmith Tools. While this category was relatively easy to analyze with LIWC, since it is specifically designed with categories dealing with the expression of emotions and rational speech (i.e., emo_pos or positive emotions, emo_neg or negative emotions, and cogproc or cognitive processes), we were unable to identify individual words that might represent positive or negative emotional speech due to the low frequency of these

⁴ Studies listed in *Table 2* have utilized the selected lexicogrammatical features or LIWC categories to examine characteristics of discourse similar to those listed in the CIP model. All studies are psycholinguistic in nature, and those by Tausczik and Pennebaker, and Boyd *et al.* are demonstrations of LIWC capabilities.

⁵ The characteristic called “use of emotions” by Crayne and Medeiros (2021) is a blanket term which actually covers both the use of emotional appeals and the forgoing of such language in favor of logical, cognitive appeals.

word types in the corpora. Rational speech, however, was examined via WordSmith Tools, using the words *think* and *know*⁶, both of which are included in the LIWC dictionary under cognitive processes (Boyd *et al.* 2022, 11). It was hypothesized that a podcaster with a charismatic style should have a higher frequency of words with positive connotations than those with negative connotations, whereas an ideological style should have the opposite trend. Finally, a pragmatic style should use words associated with cognitive processes more frequently and emotional terms less frequently.

Time frame orientation, i.e., the speakers' tendency to focus on the past, present, or future, was examined with the LIWC categories pertaining to time orientation (i.e., focuspast, focuspresent, focusfuture), and through selected words via WordSmith Tools. By comparing the frequency of words indicating temporal focus, such as *tomorrow*, *yesterday*, *normal*, or *now*, and verbs in the past, present, or future tense, a picture of speakers' time-related attentional focus can be obtained (Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010, 40; Crayne and Medeiros 2021, 466). After wordlist compilation, the only words associated with time frame orientation that were deemed frequent enough (i.e., occurring at least 50 times in each corpus) to be examined in detail via WordSmith Tools were *will*, *now* and *back*.

It was hypothesized that if the podcasters studied had a charismatic language style, they would show a greater tendency to use future-oriented language. On the other hand, an ideological style should be related to a greater usage of past-oriented language, while a pragmatic style should be associated with a focus on the present.

Locus of causation, as previously described, is where the speaker localizes the source, or cause, of events and actions: in people, in situations, or in the interaction between the two (Hunter *et al.* 2011, 89). The analysis of this trait was slightly more complicated, as there is no dedicated category in LIWC. It was found, however, that internal versus external locus of control attribution may be indicated by (1) verbs of cognition, missing, feeling, hope and auxiliary verbs (external control); (2) verbs of attempt, i.e., *try* (internal control); (3) specific part-of-speech

⁶ After compiling a word list via WordSmith Tools, words likely to be associated with positive/negative emotions or logical appeals were selected. The only words with a frequency considered sufficient for the purposes of this study were *think* and *know*.

(POS) n-grams⁷; (4) pronouns used⁸ (Rouhizadeh *et al.* 2018, 1149-1150)⁹. By going through the word list function of WordSmith Tools, it was possible to select high-frequency words that matched several of these indicators, including *very*, *get*, *other*, *think*, *know* and others (Tab. 3 for a complete list of analyzed words). Additionally, the word *virus* was added for this characteristic, given its association with the situation under discussion. The hypothesis is that the use of this word will shed light on whether people's perception of the virus (situation) determines their actions or vice versa.

Table 3. – Word list with associated raw frequencies found via WordSmith Tools.

WORD	FREQUENCY		WORD	FREQUENCY	
	CORONACAST	FACT VS. FICTION		CORONACAST	FACT VS. FICTION
will	151	99	we	607	451
back	98	91	they	466	233
now	79	167	I	346	596
get	273	168	them	111	123
very	172	82	us	105	98
people	401	326	really	215	105
virus	217	147	no	79	66
other	180	120	think	224	169
you	884	687	know	120	240

Finally, target of influence has been the least mentioned in the literature, as there are currently no studies investigating indicators of this characteristic in text. We hypothesized that pronoun usage could provide insight

⁷ Since the selected text analysis tools did not possess the capability to analyze n-grams directly, it was decided to select words that could feasibly be part of such n-grams as indicated by Rouhizadeh *et al.* 2018. These included adverbs such as *really* and *very*. For a full list of POS n-grams found to be correlated with internal or external locus of control, see the appendix of Rouhizadeh *et al.* 2018.

⁸ Use of impersonal pronouns could indicate an external locus of causation (changes and events are caused by the situation), and personal pronouns referencing themselves or the group may show signs of an internal locus of causation (change is brought about by people) (Rouhizadeh *et al.* 2018, 1149-1150).

⁹ These are the indicators chosen for this particular study, based on specific objectives. For a complete list of indicators, see Rouhizadeh *et al.* 2018.

into the podcasters' targets of influence, and thus analyzed the ways in which pronouns (*you, we, I, they, them, us*) were used to refer to different groups, whether the masses (charismatic), a base cadre of followers (ideological), or skilled elites (pragmatic). Furthermore, it was decided to include the LIWC category on prosocial speech (prosocial) as a potential indicator of a charismatic style, as this category indicates a tendency to help or care about others (Boyd *et al.* 2022, 18). *Table 3* shows all lemmas that were selected based on the word list only. They were sorted by raw frequency and then analyzed in context to identify the typical phrase-ness that might indicate the specific discursive construction of a leadership style.

3. RESULTS

Initial results from LIWC showed both hosts generally focused on the present when defining their models, with *Coronacast* slightly ahead of *Fact vs. Fiction* in present tense time-frame orientation (*Tab. 4* for relative frequency totals), indicating a pragmatic style in both podcasts. There was no support for LIWC categories indicating locus of causation, but it was possible to compare the use of impersonal versus personal pronouns. In *Coronacast*, impersonal pronouns were used more frequently, while in *Coronavirus: Fact vs. Fiction* they were balanced. We hypothesized that this may be an indication of a more interactive locus of causation in *Fact vs. Fiction*, and therefore a pragmatic style, but this theory needed further investigation using the concordance function of WordSmith Tools. Both hosts used the pronoun *you* more than *we*, which we supposed could indicate a broader target of influence, as hosts may use the generic *you* to generalize experiences to everyone (Orvell *et al.* 2017, 1299), which can be indicative of a charismatic style. Finally, since the cognitive processes category greatly outweighed the affective ones, both presenters appeared to convey information rationally to their followers rather than employing positive or negative emotions. Based on this information, both hosts appeared to fall into the pragmatic category, with some charismatic tendencies. However, given the lack of contextual information, it was not possible to draw any conclusions based solely on the information provided by LIWC.

Table 4. – Summary of average relative frequencies for examined LIWC categories pertaining to each CIP model trait¹⁰.

	CORONACAST	CORONAVIRUS: FACT VS. FICTION
Time frame orientation:	Present focus: 7.37% Past focus: 2.99% Future focus: 1.86%	Present focus: 6.8% Past focus: 3.07% Future focus: 2.12%
Locus of causation:	Impersonal pronouns: 7.43% I, you, we: 5.50%	Impersonal pronouns: 6.49% I, you, we: 6.23%
Targets of influence:	you: 2.56% we: 1.95%	you: 2.18% we: 2%
Use of emotions vs. logical appeals:	Cognitive processes: 13.31% Affective terms: 3.04%	Cognitive processes: 11.98% Affective terms: 3.64%

After running the selected lemmas through the concordance function of WordSmith Tools, we were able to narrow down the analysis to a few specific words, constructions, and n-grams that proved particularly relevant for extracting the discursive construction of leadership from the corpus. For time frame orientation, the most helpful lemmas were *will* (in conjunction with the use of pronouns, e.g., *we will, you will*), *back* (used together with verbs, e.g., *go* and *get*), and *now*. These words were most frequently associated with text segments that contained clues about the speakers’ time frame orientation. With respect to locus of causation, the n-grams *very* + [adjective] (e.g., “very contagious”) and [amount] + *of people* (e.g., “a lot of people”) were particularly informative in the way they were used. The former is a POS n-gram indicated by Rouhizadeh *et al.* (2018) (i.e., *adverb* + *adjective*) as being correlated with internal locus of control, while the latter is a pattern noticed by the authors that may be used by the podcasters in segments that referenced their locus of causation. In addition, the word *virus* and the combinations *get the* and *each other* were frequently found in segments that provided insight into this trait. Regarding the targets of influence, pronouns proved to be very useful and examining their use allowed us to form an idea of the hosts’ target audience. Finally, the lemmas *really, no, think* and *know* provided information about the tendency towards rational thinking in each speaker’s discourse, as opposed to the use of emotional appeals.

These following concordance lines show the above linguistic features in their original discursive setting first in *Coronavirus: Facts vs. Fiction*

¹⁰ Results are shown as the median relative frequency over the period analyzed.

- (4) It is true we're still seeing cases of the coronavirus go up because it is still spreading. It is a very contagious virus. If we hadn't stayed at home, we'd probably have a lot more cases.
- (5) It really is essential. All of us have a part to play in getting the situation under control. We need to do it for ourselves, and do it for our health care workers.

When it comes to the target of influence, Sanjay Gupta prevalently addresses the masses – as seen before (example 5). Making frequent use of phrases such as “we’re all in this together”, he emphasizes the need for everyone to “help each other” (example 6). His use of *we* usually includes all of the USA, and occasionally all the world (example 7). This example also contributes to the interpretation of locus of causation for Gupta, as it stresses that people working together can have a significant impact, again adding a charismatic quality to his sensemaking. Finally, he also shows altruism and attention for people on the margins of society (example 8), who are not normally considered important in influencing decisions or events. His attitude makes them a target of influence and worthy of special care, especially considering that the virus has taught us that it is pervasive and does not spare people based on their social status.

- (6) We need to help each other. We are dependent on each other. And the best thing we can do for now is to try and stay at home.
- (7) Right now, we're seeing people around the world make sacrifices and unite against a common enemy. [...] Just shows what we can accomplish when we all work together.
- (8) As most of America is asked to stay at home during this outbreak, there is a group of people who cannot: the homeless. And they are some of the most vulnerable in our population.

Overall, positive emotions emerged when *think* and *know* were analyzed, despite being labelled as verbs of cognition. In this context, Gupta uses metaphorical language such as ‘the light at the end of the tunnel’ (example 3), when he focuses on a positive aspect of some negative information (example 4), or when he expresses the need for everyone to help each other (example 6). This prevalence points to a charismatic style of sensemaking. This does not prevent him from recognizing the influence of negative emotions (example 9), but this is again used as a strategy to draw people closer together in a shared experience, rather than to coerce listeners as would be characteristic of an ideological style. In this example, as in example (3), it is clear that the word *think* does not indicate a rational appeal, but an emotional one.

- (9) I have been dealing with some loss. We all have, I think, in one form or another. Everybody who's listening probably has.

Looking at time frame orientation in the analysis of the *Coronacast* subcorpus, Norman Swan focuses on the present situation in a very pragmatic manner, evaluating the actions taken and the current results (example 10). This example also pertains to the use of logical appeals rather than emotions, reinforcing the country's disease management without relying much on emotional speech. In example (11), he rationalizes the need to go on living by providing a logical reason: the rarity of COVID-19. He speaks as well about a return *back* to normal (example 12), an ideological value, but by using the all-inclusive *we*, he attributes control to everyone, including the government. However, by highlighting the necessity for a vaccine he then localizes that control in specialists working to develop that vaccine, reinforcing his pragmatic style.

- (10) Could we have gone a bit more quickly? Perhaps. But at the end of the day we are in such a good situation now, it's hard to see where we could have done other things.
- (11) But I think now that COVID-19 is so unusual in the community, so rare, it is much safer, and people need to get on with their lives.
- (12) And again, as a community, [...] we did the right thing, Government does the right thing; we won't get back to normal, by the way, until there's a vaccine.

Although the pandemic itself is caused by the virus, for Norman Swan, the locus of causation lies within people. In example (13), he refers to the virus to highlight the government's success in curbing contagion by restricting the entry of 'overseas visitors'. Furthermore, example (14) shows how Norman Swan attributes control to those managing pandemic containment efforts, even when these efforts fail, emphasizing that the pandemic did not worsen because of a quality of the virus, but because it was allowed to. When addressing one of the consequences that the virus has brought to a lot of people, e.g., shifting work from the workplace to home, he attributes control to federal and state governments, specialists and experts who can make a difference (example 15), showing his pragmatic sensemaking style.

- (13) Our success in containing the virus so far has been containing overseas visitors and people who are carrying it from overseas.
- (14) So it's not because it's more aggressive, it's just that the pandemic has been allowed to slip to get to very large numbers.
- (15) A lot of people, 30% have transitioned from working in the office to working at home [...] the majority of people recognize the need for the

task-specific than Sanjay Gupta, who seems to have a broader view of the crisis. They seem to show a balanced use of personal pronouns vs. impersonal pronouns, suggesting that the development of the pandemic and its management are an interactive process. Both hosts target the broader society, but Norman Swan addresses Australians with a tide of patriotic nationalism, as well as working people who are at higher risk of contracting the virus, while Sanjay Gupta addresses Americans without forgetting groups of people who are often marginalized. Finally, Sanjay Gupta uses more emotional tones and figurative language, whereas Norman Swan is more rational and bases his claims on scientific data.

Table 5. – Summary of findings based on concordance line analysis and interpretation of results.

	CORONACAST	CORONAVIRUS: FACT VS. FICTION
Time frame orientation: Uncertain present and future	Present, task-at-hand focused	Broadly focused vision towards present and future
Locus of causation: Interactive, with special attention to the role of skilled people	Interactive	Interactive
Targets of influence: Masses	Australians with special attention to people at higher risk from coronavirus	Americans with special attention to marginalized groups
Use of emotions vs. rational arguments: Rational (Coronacast) vs. emotional (Fact vs. Fiction)	Rational Communication > Affective Communication	Affective Communication > Rational Communication

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, the DHA laid out a solid framework upon which we could build our analysis. Following the ideal-typical discourse-historical analysis, consisting in an 8-stage program (Wodak 2020, 33), combined with the CADS approach we were able to locate indicators of discursive sensemaking characteristics that were similar to those outlined in the CIP model in the examined health experts' discourse.

From these results, one could conclude that *Coronacast* host Norman Swan has a predominantly pragmatic style of sensemaking with some charismatic traits, whereas Sanjay Gupta demonstrates a majorly charismatic style with pragmatic undertones. The latter showed a prevalent focus on the present and future, characteristic of pragmatic and charismatic leaders, respectively. He also seemed to target his messages to all citizens, again a charismatic trait. He tended to use more affective language than the other podcast host examined, providing another indication of leaders possessing charismatic traits. However, he seemed to attribute control of the situation to highly skilled individuals, a pragmatic trait. Furthermore, on occasion, he spoke about a return to normal, a classic ideological standpoint. On the other hand, Norman Swan often focused more on the issues at hand, employing logical appeals to influence his audience, and situating most of the control in skilled people, all of which are traits of a pragmatic leader. However, his targets appeared to be the Australian people in general, indicating a charismatic approach in this sense. This research is consistent with recent findings that leaders may incorporate various elements of each leadership style but tend to align to a single predominant pathway (Crane and Medeiros 2021, 464).

Regarding the chosen analytical tools, LIWC and WordSmith Tools were both useful in varying degrees in identifying target characteristics in the corpus. LIWC appeared helpful for more general traits, e.g., time frame orientation and use of emotions or logical processes, while it did not provide insight into locus of causation. Since this tool is made to assign psycholinguistic labels to individual words, it was unable to identify types of discourse that require the use of context to be fully understood. These findings are in accordance with the criticism posed by Hunt and Brooks (2020, 21), who noted that LIWC is lacking in its attention to the notion that words take their meaning from their context of use. The use of WordSmith Tools helped overcome this limitation to some extent, allowing us to view words along with their context within concordance lines. In fact, WordSmith Tools was very useful in identifying targets of influence and time frame orientation. By examining the most frequently used words believed to be associated with time expressions, it was possible to confirm the prevalent time focus of each speaker. Furthermore, the investigation of concordance lines containing pronouns, especially *we* and *you*, allowed us to confirm that each speaker mostly referred to the wider public as their targets of influence.

Finally, this study aimed to evaluate the quality of the two podcasts *Coronacast* and *Coronavirus: Fact vs. Fiction*, and their suitability as

sources for reliable COVID-19 information, an objective championed by the WHO in the attempt to increase public trust in digital health information (WHO 2021, 55). Analysis of the hosts' discourse allowed us to understand how each expert formed prescriptive models and communicated them to their listeners. By understanding discursive styles and their application in health podcasting, it may be possible to evaluate their effectiveness in promoting trust in online health communication and acceptance of health protocols. Though the current analysis is applied only to two podcasts, it is the authors' hope that this work can stimulate discussion into methods of identifying effective practices for the dissemination of health information online and through social media.

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Links to Podcasts

Coronacast

<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/coronacast>

Coronavirus: Fact vs. Fiction

Podcast on CNN Audio (no longer accessible to the public)

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