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Dialogic analysis of government social media communication: How commanding and thanking elicit blame

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ABSTRACT

During major crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, government officeholders issue commands to change people's behaviour (e.g., 'Stay at home!') and express thanks to acknowledge the efforts of others and build solidarity. We use specialised datasets of replies to social media posts by government ministers in the United Kingdom during Covid-19 lockdowns to explore how people react to their messages that contain directive speech acts and thanking. Empirically, our corpus-assisted analysis of evaluative language and blaming shows that far from promoting team spirit, thanking may elicit at least as much, if not more blaming language than commands. Methodologically, we demonstrate how to analyse government social media communication dialogically to gain more nuanced insights about online feedback from citizens.

1. Introduction

In the context of major crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders are expected to heed warnings and take charge of crisis management efforts, but often fail to do so (Boin and 't Hart, 2003; Læg Reid and Rykkja, 2019). To protest against the poor handling of the crisis by the authorities, disaffected citizens may express blame in a variety of ways (Hansson et al., 2022). To save their face and hold on to power, government officeholders may communicate in self-defensive ways (Boin et al., 2010; Hood, 2011; Hansson, 2015; Hansson and Page, 2022, 2023; Hinterleitner, 2020; Leong et al., 2023). The resulting blame games increasingly occur on social media (Johnen et al., 2018). It is important to study the interaction between politicians and citizens on social media because this may affect what issues politicians perceive as more salient and then shape their offline behaviour and policy choices (Schöll et al., 2023). In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, these choices had significant health, social and economic implications.

The emerging discourse-analytic literature on the crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic has begun to evaluate the relative success and failure of different national leaders to manage the situation, especially focusing on the linguistic resources they employed in their public announcements (e.g., Wodak, 2021; Jaworska, 2021; Marsen and Ali-Chand, 2022; Power and Crosthwaite, 2022; Vincent et al., 2023; Berrocal and Salamurović, 2023; Love et al., 2023) and messaging

uptake (McCloughlin et al., 2023). What is missing from the literature thus far is a dialogic analysis which shows empirically how people engaged with the online messages given by government officials about the crisis. We fill that research gap, showing how people responded to politicians in the United Kingdom as they communicated with the public via Twitter during a critical period of the pandemic.

We focus on online responses to two contrasting types of messages that are important in crisis communication. On the one hand, leaders must provide clear instructing information, for example using directives to bring about the desired changes in people's behaviour (Marsen and Ali-Chand, 2022). On the other hand, leaders must also build solidarity and rapport, for example by acknowledging the team effort of others. One of the key speech acts used for this end is thanking. We are interested in which of these two types of speech acts that were commonly used by government officials in their social media posts in the context of crises – directives and expressives – are more likely to receive replies that contain expressions of blame. This is relevant because recent research into government social media communication during the Covid-19 pandemic suggests that political leaders try to claim credit and avoid blame by using both messages expressing more 'negative' sentiments, such as directives and warnings, as well as more 'positive' ones, such as thanking and well wishes (Leong et al., 2023). However, there has not yet been empirical comparison of the responses to these two strategies as they are used in mediated forms of crisis communication.

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Our study builds upon and contributes to the literature on facework in conflictual political discourse, responding to calls to explore how facework is carried out and responded to in new technological forms (Tracy, 2017, p. 754). Specifically, our study addresses the question: How do the blaming strategies occur in people's responses to social media posts from politicians that contain directive speech acts or thanking?

2. Literature review

2.1. Commanding

Government officeholders may use language as an instrument of their executive power and induce citizens to act in certain ways (Hansson, 2017). When disasters or hazards emerge, authorities are expected to provide warnings and behavioural guidance to save lives. The use of directives – instructions to perform a certain action determined by the speaker – may be seen as bald-on-record threats to face (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and thus potentially undermine the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. However, in the case of emergency situations, where maximum efficiency of communication is required, Brown and Levinson (1987, section 5.2.1) point out that face redress may be seen as unnecessary.

Directives may be expressed in several syntactic forms, such as need statements ('I need X'), imperatives ('Give me X'), or imbedded imperatives ('Could you give me X'), which vary in terms of their obviousness and may be regarded as more or less polite depending on the context of their usage (Ervin-Tripp, 1976). The perceived weight of the imposition also depends on the form of activity (e.g., physical or cognitive acts) the target is instructed to engage in (Hyland, 2002). The relative power of the speaker may affect the perception of (im)politeness of the use of directives: direct commands may not be considered impolite in the case of high-power speakers addressing relatively low-power speakers (Culpeper, 2011). On social media, directive messages by the government may be framed as 'public service announcements' that provide recommendations for public health and safety (DePaula et al., 2018).

In the context of Covid-19, the directives given by the UK government that were used in Twitter were also used as slogans (e.g., 'Stay at home!' which emerged as a global slogan in English speaking countries) that evolved iteratively in wider government communication, such as press briefings (Jones, 2021). In these press briefings, the slogans were recontextualised in a range of linguistic strategies and with different degrees of frequency (Vincent et al., 2023) by different national leaders. However, how people responded to these directives when they were used on social media is not yet known.

2.2. Thanking

Thanking belongs to a set of expressive speech acts that politicians use as 'solidarity-enhancing devices' together with congratulating, praising, well-wishing, greeting, and blessing (Kampf, 2016). Thanking may be regarded as a 'welcoming action': it displays pleasure and support for someone's rational or smart choice and affirms and signals appreciation of efforts invested by others (Kampf, 2016). Thanking can also be conceptualised as a positive politeness strategy of 'giving gifts to a hearer' (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Thanking may be performed in combination with other solidarity-oriented speech acts, such as complimenting and praising (Kampf and Danziger, 2019) and may be perceived as a form of flattery (Danziger, 2020). Thanking may be part of linguistic rituals where reciprocity – mutual symbolic repayment of debt – is relevant (Ohashi, 2008). Culpeper and Tantucci (2021) have suggested that in interaction, "there is pressure to match the perceived or anticipated (im)politeness of other participants, thereby maintaining a balance of payments" (p. 150). From that perspective, thanking can be used strategically to elicit reciprocal polite expressions from (potentially critical) interlocutors.

In psychology, existing research points to the prosocial outcomes of gratitude (Bartlett and DeSteno, 2006; Grant and Gino, 2010), where the anticipation of positive reciprocity is likely to bring benefits for politicians, such as mobilising voters (Panagopoulos, 2011; Chaudhry and Loewenstein, 2019). Other studies have pointed to the use of thanks as a positive impression management tactic that increases perceptions of a person's warmth (Sezer, 2022). Failure to express thanks may have negative consequences (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986). In the context of Covid-19, emerging studies suggest that the outcomes of thanking may not be clear cut. Day et al. (2022) found that thanking directed towards the National Health Service in the United Kingdom at the start of the pandemic became divisive and was considered a superficial response from politicians when tangible resource (money, protective clothing, etc.) was needed. To the best of our knowledge, the extent to which thanking might be a source of blaming in this context has not yet been tested empirically.

2.3. Blaming

In politics, blaming may be used to pressure a powerful actor, such as a policymaker, to change their behaviour, for instance, stop devising or implementing a policy that is harmful to a group in society (Jasper et al., 2020; Johannesson and Weinryb, 2021). The politicians who are targeted by public blame may be seen more negatively and lose electoral support (Marsh and Tilley, 2010). The language of blame targeted at government actors may be analysed in terms of its evaluative basis and focus and conceived of as a set of typical 'strategies of blaming' (Hansson et al., 2022). Specifically, drawing on Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal theory, blaming may be based on negative judgements of an actor's *capacity* (competence or ability), *veracity* (truthfulness or honesty), *propriety* (moral standing) or *tenacity* (resolve or how dependable they are), and these judgements may be construed in ways that focus on evaluating either a person's *character* (e.g., 'you are a liar'), their *behaviour* ('you are lying'), or the *outcome* of their action ('this is a lie').¹

Within Appraisal theory, judgements can be combined with *graduation*, that is, the resources by which evaluation are scaled up or down, through force. *Force* is the variable scaling of intensity, which in Martin and White's work is indicated lexically through adverbs, boosters, and emphasisers. In the context of social media interactions, forms of expressive punctuation (Herring and Zelenkauskaite, 2008) also function as resources for force. For example, Ross and Caldwell (2020) note how the use of all caps and exclamation marks raised the force of Donald Trump's negative evaluation of his rival candidate Hillary Clinton during the presidential campaign of 2016 in the United States. Exclamation marks have been recognised as a marker of 'excitability' (Colley et al., 2004; Waseleski, 2006) and a resource for emotive language (Fuoli and Bednarek, 2022). Exclamation marks are multifunctional and have an 'inflationary' potential (Androutsopoulos and Busch, 2021) that can increase or decrease Force. For example, Vandergriff (2013) found that as interactional cue, multiple exclamation marks were used to indicate intentional face attacks in some contexts, and friendliness in others. Teh et al. (2015) also observed that multiple exclamation marks increased the strength of the sentiment for both positive and negative messages. The potential for digital punctuation, specifically in the form of multiple exclamation marks opens up further possibilities of exploring blaming

¹ While Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal framework incorporates three domains for expressing attitudes – Affect (emotional responses, e.g., "worried"), Appreciation (aesthetic evaluation of things, e.g., "ugly"), and Judgment (moral evaluation of human behavior and character, e.g., "corrupt") – only the latter most clearly encodes who should be blamed for what. The evaluation of outcomes (e.g., 'this is a failure') may in certain cases be seen as evoking the judgment of human behavior and the subcategories of judgement align fittingly with the social expectations towards politicians (see Hansson et al., 2022).

Table 1
List of government officeholders used to compile the overall corpus for the project.

Name	Position	Twitter handle
Arlene Foster	First Minister, Northern Ireland	@DUPleader
Boris Johnson	Prime Minister, UK	@10DowningStreet @BorisJohnson
Dominic Raab	Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs	@Dominicraab
Liz Truss	Secretary of State for International Trade	@Trussliz
Mark Drakeford	First Minister, Wales	@FMWales
Matt Hancock	Health Secretary	@Matthancock
Nicola Sturgeon	First Minister, Scotland	@NicolaSturgeon
Priti Patel	Home Secretary	@PritiPatel
Rishi Sunak	Chancellor of the Exchequer	@Rishisunak

strategies at a more fine-grained level, as differentiating between blaming which is more or less emotionally charged.

3. Data and methods

Our study takes a corpus-assisted approach to the analysis of blaming strategies in responses to messages posted by politicians on Twitter. Responding to recent calls for triangulation (Egbert and Baker, 2019), we combined corpus linguistics and Appraisal analysis in a three-stage process. In stage one, we used keyword analysis to explore the distinctive evaluative vocabulary likely to indicate blaming in replies to messages containing the directive *stay at home* and in replies to messages containing *thanks*. In stage two, we used Appraisal analysis to identify blaming strategies in a down-sampled subset of responses to politicians' tweets which contained multiple exclamation marks as a non-standard form of punctuation found in earlier studies to indicate heightened emotionality, including face attack (Vandergriff, 2013, p. 6), comparing the replies to messages containing the directive *stay at home* and replies to messages expressing thanks. In stage three, we used Appraisal analysis to identify blaming strategies in a smaller down-sampled subset of responses to three politicians who used commands and thanks in their tweets.

In the following sections, we describe the corpora, the down-sampling procedures, and the analytic framework in detail.

3.1. Corpus design: Governmental tweets and replies

The data for this project was drawn from two corpora of messages posted to Twitter collected using a bespoke R script during a three-month period between 31 October 2020 and 31 January 2021 when the UK government announced the second and third Covid-19 lockdowns. The first corpus, 'Governmental Tweets' (16,674,784 words), consists of English Language tweets by 9 ministers in the UK, selected based on their appointment at the time of the data collection (Table 1). The second corpus, 'Replies' consists of English Language replies to these tweets from Twitter users (10,169,988 words).²

Our focus is on two contrasting messages sent by politicians: tweets containing directives, specifically the command used in the Covid-19 lockdowns to 'stay at home', and tweets expressing thanks towards a third party. There are various lexical expressions that are synonymous with thanking (as indicated through the Thesaurus function of Sketch Engine), such as saying that a person is 'grateful' or that they 'appreciate' a third party. However, *thank* was by far the most frequently used lexical expression for this speech act in the Government tweets. The relative frequency of the lemma *appreciate* was 0.36, *grateful* 184, and *thank* 2,363 per million tokens. Likewise, *stay [at] home* was not the only directive used during the lockdown. However, it was the core imperative used by all regions of the United Kingdom and was directed at the actions of recipients in a face threatening manner (imposing on their

freedom of movement) rather than alternative commands used in similar slogans from the period such as, 'stay alert'. The phrase *stay [at] home* and the lemma *thank* were therefore used as seed terms in the parallel corpora function of Sketch Engine.

Sketch Engine (<https://www.sketchengine.eu>) is a corpus tool, which can be used for semi-automated text analysis (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). It includes the option of uploading and searching parallel corpora, that is, datasets of the same text translated into different languages. These texts are linked via matching segments, meaning that researchers can search for one word or phrase in the 'original' text and identify how it is 'translated' into another (Lefer, 2020).

Our method follows Fuoli and Bednarek (2022) who 'repurposed' the parallel corpora function of Sketch Engine for dialogic analysis of customer complaints and company responses. In our case, we treated the Government tweets as the 'original' text and the replies to those tweets as the 'translated' text. We used the phrase, *stay [at] home*, as a seed term and identified all the replies to those tweets. We also used the lemma, *thank*, to identify all the messages from the politicians containing this search term and the replies to those tweets. Illustrative examples of tweets and replies as they appear in the parallel corpora in Sketch Engine for each seed term are given in Figs. 1 and 2. A summary of the tweets and replies to the two message types is given in Table 2. All the replies to these two message types were then analysed using keyword analysis to explore the evaluative language indicative of blaming (see Section 4.1).

3.2. Down-sampled replies: Blame boosted by multiple exclamation marks

As noted above, we considered exclamation marks as indicators of graduation (Martin and White, 2005; Ross and Caldwell, 2020) that might increase the force of the negative judgement typical of blaming. We used a concordance search in Sketch Engine to identify how often single and multiple exclamation marks occurred in the data (see Table 3). We focused on replies containing multiple exclamation marks as a non-standard punctuation form used to boost the intensity of sentiment in a message (Teh et al., 2015). Of the replies containing multiple exclamation marks, a random sample of 200 posts responding to a message instructing people to stay at home and a random sample of 200 posts responding to a message expressing thanks were analysed using categories from Appraisal theory.

3.3. Down-sampled replies: Blame targeted at selected politicians

Finally, we down-sampled from the overall set of replies to focus on responses to a smaller subset of politicians and their messages to investigate whether the patterns of blaming varied at a more granular level. The criteria used to identify the politicians was based on the politician's use of the search terms (*stay at home* and *thank*) in their messages, and the frequency of replies (at least 100 responses available). We were interested in political figures who were not first ministers as under-scrutinised examples (e.g., see Vincent et al. (2023) who in contrast include Johnson and Sturgeon in their data). Table 4

² Size of corpora is as calculated by Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014).

<p>doc#0</p> <p><s> Stay at home. </s><s> Protect the NHS. </s><s> Save lives. https://t.co/PUN79POzAw </s></p>	<p>@BorisJohnson What is the logic for closing all golf courses yet RHS gardens remain open for people to visit and take outdoor exercise?? </s></p>
<p>doc#0</p> <p><s> Stay at home. </s><s> Protect the NHS. </s><s> Save lives. https://t.co/PUN79POzAw </s></p>	<p>@BorisJohnson Stay at home. </s><s> Protect the NHS. </s><s> Save lives. </s><s> Go to work in vehicle showrooms with over 10 households. </s></p>
<p>doc#0</p> <p><s> Stay at home. </s><s> Protect the NHS. </s><s> Save lives. https://t.co/PUN79POzAw </s></p>	<p>@BorisJohnson Your big 46 ritual eh . Lockdown by the numbers gematria kabbalah. </s></p>
<p>doc#0</p> <p><s> Stay at home. </s><s> Protect the NHS. </s><s> Save lives. https://t.co/PUN79POzAw </s></p>	<p>@BorisJohnson Still lying to the end, still taking advice from Ferguson, you have a lot in common with him, liars, adulterers, kids everywhere, not to mention abortions, what lovely people you lot are </s></p>
<p>doc#0</p> <p><s> Stay at home. </s><s> Protect the NHS. </s><s> Save lives. https://t.co/PUN79POzAw </s></p>	<p>@BorisJohnson It's getting boring. </s><s> Lives are in no more danger than they are every year in Jan. The danger is you, Johnson </s></p>

Fig. 1. Screenshot showing the parallel corpus function for tweets containing *stay at home* and their replies.

<p>doc#0</p> <p><s> Over 500,000 doses of the @Pfizer/@BioNTech_Group vaccine have been given to people across the United Kingdom to protect those most at risk from coronavirus. </s><s> Thank you to to all our scientists, NHS staff & volunteers who have made this possible. https://t.co/ALNdpVKP28 </s></p>	<p>@10DowningStreet @BorisJohnson @pfizer @BioNTech_Group My 96 year old mother has not been invited for COVID-19 vaccination. </s><s> I have been informed supplies are limited so the GP practice are randomly selecting patients for vaccination. </s><s> Comments please @BorisJohnson @MattHancock </s></p>
<p>doc#0</p> <p><s> Over 500,000 doses of the @Pfizer/@BioNTech_Group vaccine have been given to people across the United Kingdom to protect those most at risk from coronavirus. </s><s> Thank you to to all our scientists, NHS staff & volunteers who have made this possible. https://t.co/ALNdpVKP28 </s></p>	<p>@10DowningStreet @MattHancock @pfizer @BioNTech_Group If the virus is so contagious 70% worse than before, why are you sending children back in January and why are the airports still open. </s></p>
<p>doc#0</p> <p><s> Over 500,000 doses of the @Pfizer/@BioNTech_Group vaccine have been given to people across the United Kingdom to protect those most at risk from coronavirus. </s><s> Thank you to to all our scientists, NHS staff & volunteers who have made this possible. https://t.co/ALNdpVKP28 </s></p>	<p>@10DowningStreet @MattHancock @pfizer @BioNTech_Group No one cares </s></p>
<p>doc#0</p> <p><s> Over 500,000 doses of the @Pfizer/@BioNTech_Group vaccine have been given to people across the United Kingdom to protect those most at risk from coronavirus. </s><s> Thank you to to all our scientists, NHS staff & volunteers who have made this possible. https://t.co/ALNdpVKP28 </s></p>	<p>@10DowningStreet @MattHancock @pfizer @BioNTech_Group Resign. https://t.co/yzv4YAjxi7 </s></p>
<p>doc#0</p> <p><s> Over 500,000 doses of the @Pfizer/@BioNTech_Group vaccine have been given to people across the United Kingdom to protect those most at risk from coronavirus. </s><s> Thank you to to all our scientists, NHS staff & volunteers who have made this possible. https://t.co/ALNdpVKP28 </s></p>	<p>@10DowningStreet @MattHancock @pfizer @BioNTech_Group Sorry, you were saying. </s><s> To make a mistake is understandable to make the same mistake 3 times is just totally incompetent. https://t.co/ozfCgH3LYK </s></p>

Fig. 2. Screenshot showing the parallel corpus function for tweets containing the lemma *thank* and their replies.

Table 2
Description of tweets containing *stay at home* and *thank* and their replies.

Search term	<i>Stay at home</i>	<i>Thank</i>
Number of politicians' posts containing the term	68	133
Raw frequency of search term	114	584
Relative frequency of search term (per million tokens)	461.46	2,363.97
Total number of replies to the posts containing the seed term	49,803	52,504
	1,082,924 tokens	1,296,899 tokens
	437 replies/tweet	395 replies/tweet
Average length of reply	22 words	28 words

summarises the frequencies of each seed term as they occurred in the posts from each politician and the replies to the tweets containing those messages. The ministers whose interactions met the criteria for this component of the analysis were Matt Hancock, Dominic Raab, and Priti Patel. These ministers are further of interest, first because of the different roles they occupied during the period in question: Hancock was Health Secretary, Raab Foreign Minister, and Patel Home Secretary. All three made appearances at the daily pandemic press conferences. All three were also controversial figures: Hancock and Raab both breached Covid-19 rules and resigned from their posts in the period shortly after the data was collected for this study; Patel meanwhile faced allegations of bullying civil servants. The types of scandals in which the individual politicians were later implicated and their differing areas of responsibility might have influenced the negativity with which their tweets were received.

Each of the tweets from the three politicians was read to ensure that there was no overlap between those containing the command to stay at

Table 3
Frequency of expressive punctuation in the replies to governmental tweets.

Corpus Frequency	Responses to tweets containing <i>stay at home</i>		Responses to tweets containing <i>thank</i>		Responses to all tweets from 'Government tweets' corpus	
	Raw	Relative	Raw	Relative	Raw	Relative
Single exclamation mark	11,402	8,574	11,000	8,482	120,287	8,333
Multiple exclamation marks	2991	2249	2557	1972	28,146	1,950

Table 4
Raw and relative frequency of each seed term, and number of replies to the tweets with the seed terms by politician.

Politician	<i>Stay [at] home</i>			<i>Thank</i>		
	Raw	Relative	Replies	Raw	Relative	Replies
Boris Johnson	35	142	953	103	417	3,798
Matt Hancock	31	125	16,395	263	1065	3480
Nicola Sturgeon	11	45	2089	51	206	927
Mark Drakeford	15	61	1576	53	215	913
Priti Patel	4	16	1282	21	85	860
Dominic Raab	1	4	147	52	210	564
Arlene Foster	6	24	2	28	113	124
Rishi Sunak	2	8	76	7	28	67
Liz Truss	10	40	0	6	24	5

Table 5
List of tweets from ministers and their number of replies.

Tweet	Minister	Replies
Here's the new guidance covering the lockdown. The message is stay at home to protect lives & NHS, given the rate of transmission of the new variant. We will exit lockdown once the elderly & vulnerable have been vaccinated - with rollout proceeding at pace.	Dominic Raab	122
This has been the most challenging of years, but together we've pulled together as a nation. Thank you to NHS, key workers & my brilliant FCDO staff for working so hard to beat this virus. I wish you all a safe & merry #Christmas and a #HappyNewYear	Dominic Raab	72
More than 8 million people across the United Kingdom have now received their first vaccine dose. Thank you to everyone who has come forward to get their jab	Dominic Raab	36
We've got to work together to protect the NHS. Stay at home. Save lives.	Priti Patel	1282
Thank you to every single frontline police officer and staff officer for your heroic work in keeping people safe this year. The bravery & sacrifice you've shown throughout has been truly inspirational. I will always stand with you and the thousands of new recruits joining you	Priti Patel	472
Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives. DETAILS of how this works are here	Matt Hancock	303
Thank you Dido and the whole NHS Test & Trace team keeping us safe this Christmas	Matt Hancock	2118

home and an expression of thanks. As far as possible, similar messages were chosen from each politician's messages (e.g., the topic of the post was related to Covid-19 and thanks directed towards a collective group, rather than an individual). A full list of these tweets is available in Table 5.

A sample of up to 100 replies from each of the originating tweets was then selected, and in the case of Dominic Raab, a second message and its replies were selected to meet the quantitative threshold of 100 replies. The 600 replies were also checked for overlap with the down-sample of replies with multiple exclamation marks. There were no duplicates in the two down-sampled subsets. Of the 600 replies to individual politicians, four percent (n = 26) contained multiple exclamations, meaning that the two down-sampled subsets can be regarded as providing complementary perspectives: one which focuses on responses that were more emotionally charged (indicated through multiple exclamation marks) and one which was less emotionally charged, and which compared the responses to individual cabinet ministers.

Table 6
Types of blaming strategy with examples from the dataset.

Basis of blaming	Focus of blaming		
	Character	Behaviour	Outcome
<i>Capacity</i>	Inept little man	You have destroyed millions of lives	Useless political show
<i>Veracity</i>	Lying politicians	You're lying	More bullshit
<i>Propriety</i>	Self-serving bully	You've conned your way into a position of power	Endless tyrannical rules
<i>Tenacity</i>	Shambolic Tories	At a snail's pace...0.600 k completed in four weeks??	Yet another U turn

3.4. Framework for analysis

The two sets of down-sampled replies were analysed for the blaming strategies, based on the framework set out in Hansson et al. (2022). This comprises Appraisal analysis of judgement (Martin and White, 2005) to determine the basis and focus of blaming (see Table 6). Using an annotation manual, both authors independently coded a pilot sample of 100 replies. Seventy-seven percent agreement was reached on first coding, and on discussion, all remaining disagreements were resolved. The full sample of replies was then coded by the first author, checked by the second author and any errors or ambiguous cases of coding resolved.

4. Results

4.1. Keyword analysis of all replies to posts containing stay at home and thank

The two sets of replies (all those responding to posts containing *stay at home* and all those responding to posts containing *thank*) were used as focus and reference corpus respectively to generate two keyword lists in Sketch Engine: one for *stay at home*, one for *thank*. The two keyword lists consisted of 1000 words each. From each list we identified all the words that might indicate Judgement and checked the concordance lines containing those keywords to ascertain what subtypes and polarities of Judgment were present. Table 7 presents examples of keywords from each Judgement category. Illustrative concordance lines are given below.

@fmwales It's most certainly clear through this whole debacle that the NHS and the Government aren't fit for purpose

Table 7
Illustrative evaluative keywords from the replies to posts containing *stay at home* and *thank*.

Type of Judgement	Keywords in replies to posts containing <i>stay at home</i>	Keywords in replies to posts containing <i>thank</i>
<i>Capacity</i>	Weak, lame, debacle	Achievement, inspire, heroic, atrocity, flawed, incorrect
<i>Veracity</i>	Credibility, hypocritical, brainwash	Mislead, disingenuous, misinformation
<i>Propriety</i>	Culpable, indoctrination, defund	Loot, crook, bribery
<i>Tenacity</i>	U-turn, contradiction	Roulette, gamble

@BorisJohnson Socialist **indoctrination** of our children from a state sponsored propaganda machine

@BorisJohnson **hypocritical** rhetoric from a fraud.

@MattHancock We look at the U-turns and confusion caused by the Govt and feel extremely concerned e.g. changing the vaccine schedule for the Pfizer-Biontech vaccine without presenting the evidence.

We then calculated the number of evaluative keywords indicating Judgement for all the replies to the command to *stay at home* and for all the replies to tweets expressing thanks. The results of this comparison are given in Table 8.

These keywords suggest several points of comparison between how people responded to tweets directing them to stay at home and tweets expressing thanks. First, based on the number of evaluative keywords, the response to thanks is distinctive in that it contained nearly twice as many keywords indicating Judgement (169 instances) compared to the responses to the directive, *stay at home* (86 instances). The polarity of the Judgement also seems to vary, with the number of evaluative keywords in the responses to thanks containing a smaller proportion of negative Judgement (57 %, n = 97) than responses to the directive, *stay at home* (95 %, n = 82). However, the number of keywords indicating negative Judgement was not very different in the two sets of replies (82 and 97 instances in replies to *stay at home* and *thanks* respectively). Thus, the keywords suggest that the kinds of evaluation typical of blaming was characteristic of both sets of replies, but in the responses to messages containing thanks, this negative judgement occurred alongside instances of positive judgement (specifically of capacity), as in the following examples.

@10DowningStreet Tremendous achievement – my parents are among those who’ve just received the #PfizerBioNTech #vaccine and I feel so grateful to those that made this happen

@BorisJohnson The development of the vaccine has been a truly heroic effort.

A quantitative comparison of the subtypes of negative judgement indicated through the keywords suggests that the blaming strategies in response to the two types of messages may also differ. The keywords in the responses to the directive to stay at home were most often those typical of negative capacity (accounting for 41 % of the evaluative keywords in those replies), while in the responses to thanks, negative judgements of propriety and veracity occurred more often (38 % and 34 % of the evaluative keywords for those replies). A summary of the proportion of each of the negative judgement subtypes for each set of replies is given in Fig. 3.

It is perhaps not surprising that the responses to the directive *stay at home* contained blaming related to the perceived inadequacy of the government’s actions to date, especially given that this data was collected at the time of the second lockdown in the UK, during which time many U-turns in decisions had caused Prime Minister Johnson’s approval ratings to fall (Buchan, 2020). Many of the replies expressed blame towards the politicians for weak leadership and political infighting, for instance:

Table 8

Number of evaluative keywords by Judgement subtype (1000 keywords considered for each focus corpus).

Type of Judgement	Stay at home			Thank		
	Negative	Positive	Total	Negative	Positive	Total
Capacity	34	1	35	22	59	81
Veracity	16	2	18	33	0	33
Propriety	22	0	22	37	9	46
Tenacity	10	1	11	5	4	9
Total	82	4	86	97	72	169

@fmwales Get a grip and toe the line. This is why we are in this state, with your lame party politics.

What is perhaps more surprising is the extent to which blaming, especially focused on veracity and propriety, occurred in response to the politicians’ message containing thanks, given that these kinds of messages are usually considered to be face-enhancing strategies which promote the reputation of others. The keywords relating to negative veracity indicate distrust in the government and their claims to truth, for example:

@MattHancock You shouldn’t be saying thank you, you should be apologising for the lies you have told and the **misleading** information you have been putting out.

One explanation for the blaming strategies found in response to the tweets expressing thanks is that in the context of Twitter, during a high-level crisis such as a pandemic, even presumably face-enhancing messages become prompts for people to blame the government at a general level, and that the UK government’s typical strategies of successful communication ‘made for a failed brand’ in the context of this crisis (Lilleker and Stoeckle, 2021, p. 6).

4.2. Appraisal analysis of replies with multiple exclamation marks

While a keyword analysis can provide an initial overview of the distinctive vocabulary used in blaming, it cannot provide an in-depth understanding of who was being blamed for what. To explore in more detail how these blaming strategies were used, we turn to a close analysis of 1000 selected replies, beginning with 400 replies which contained multiple exclamation marks. The replies were analysed for the presence, polarity, subtypes, and focus of the judgement. The quantitative results of these comparisons are reported below.

4.2.1. Presence of judgement

The results in Table 9 show that for responses containing multiple exclamation marks, replies to thanks contained slightly more instances of Judgement (56 %, n = 112) than did replies to messages telling people to stay at home (48 %, n = 96). The difference is explained in part by the greater number of positive judgements in the replies to thanks (n = 14), than in replies to the directive to stay at home (n = 6). Overall, the proportion of negative vs. positive judgement was broadly similar for the two types of message, where for responses to thanks, 87 percent of the judgement was negative and 13 percent positive, and for responses to the directive to stay at home, 93 percent of the Judgement was negative and 7 percent positive. These figures confirm the trend suggested by the analysis of the keywords but suggests that when the message contains multiple exclamation marks, the likelihood of observing negative judgement increases.

4.2.2. Basis of blaming

As with the evaluative keywords, the analysis of the replies with multiple exclamation marks showed that there are some differences in the strategies which characterised the responses to thanks compared to those containing directives (Fig. 4). Specifically, there are more negative judgments of propriety in responses to thanks (29 %, n = 28) than in the directive to stay at home (22 %, n = 19), for example:

@BorisJohnson He’s a scummy man, give him half a chance I’d bet he’d rob you if he can!!

@MattHancock Hancock waited until parliament closed to force through all the economy wrecking restrictions with no scrutiny. Criminal!!

Unlike the evaluative keywords, the proportion of judgements of capacity and veracity are broadly similar for each type of message in the replies to thanks and the directive to stay at home.

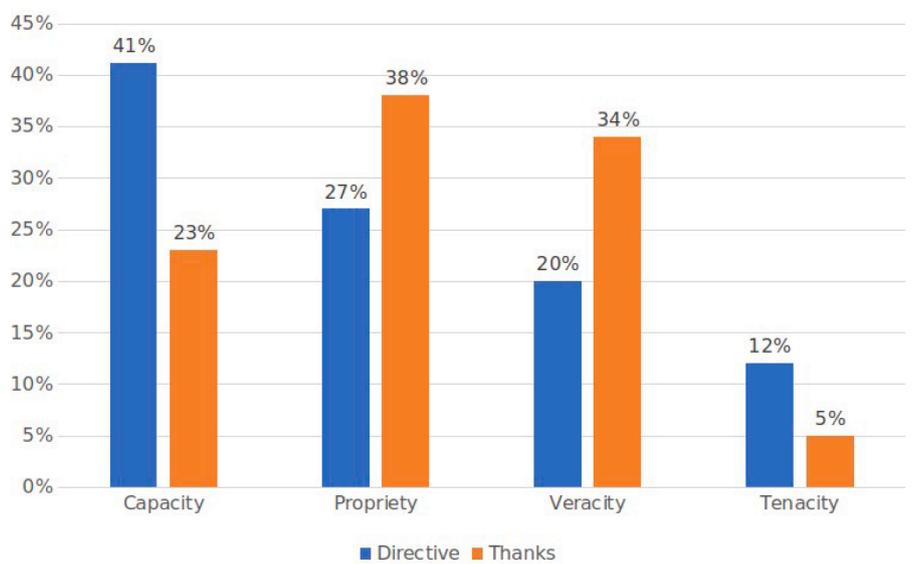


Fig. 3. Types of negative judgement in the keywords generated from replies to tweets containing *stay at home* and replies to tweets containing the lemma, *thank*.

Table 9
Quantitative comparison of Judgment in the replies with multiple exclamation marks.

	Total replies	Number of Judgements	Negative	Positive
<i>Stay at home</i>	200	96	90	6
<i>Thank</i>	200	112	98	14

4.2.3. Focus of blaming

The replies containing multiple exclamation marks were analysed for the focus of blaming (Table 10). The focus of blaming is important, for the choice of whether to represent the target of blaming as a person, the behaviour of a person, or an outcome can be used to foreground or

background the relative agency of the person involved. Experimental work has shown that this distinction has implications for the perceived intensity of the blame expression, where outcome-focused blaming is seen as the least critical and character-focused the most critical (Hansson et al., 2023).

In this subset of the data, where the blaming is intensified through the punctuation marks, there is more blaming focused on behaviour, and this is particularly frequent in the response to directives. This included all subtypes of judgement, most often negative judgements of capacity (n = 18) and propriety (n = 9). These examples of negative judgements of capacity relate to replies that deemed the instruction to stay at home inadequate as a response to the pandemic, for instance:

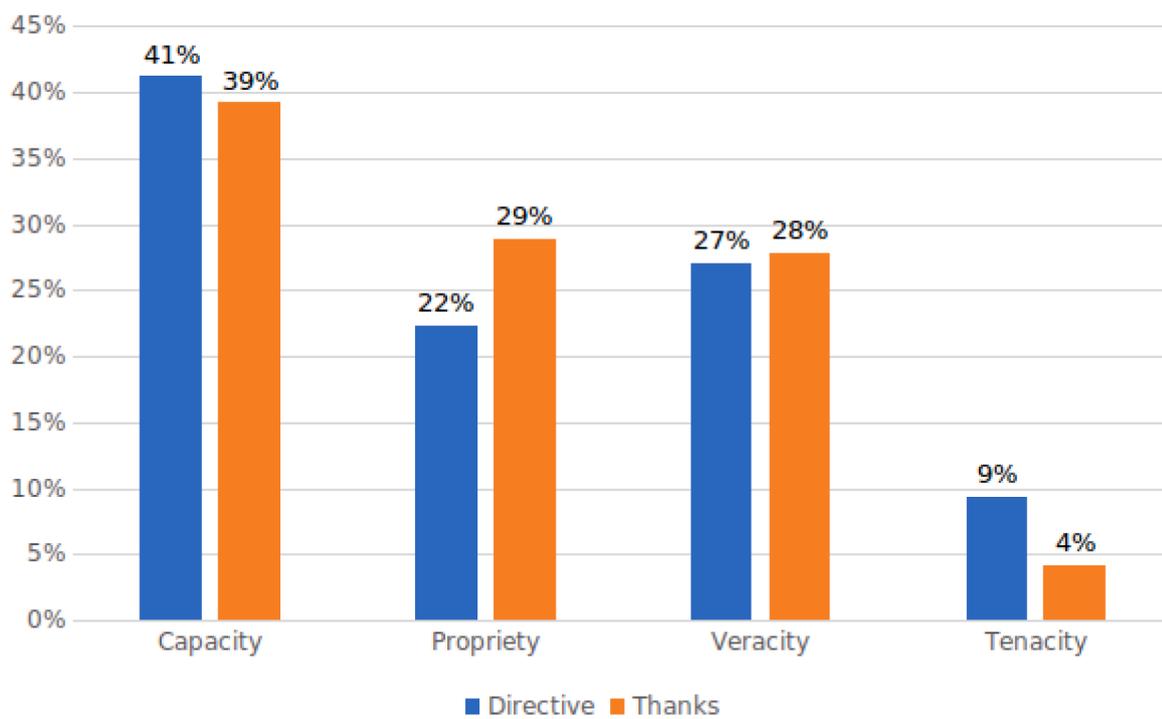


Fig. 4. Basis of blaming in replies containing multiple exclamation marks.

Table 10
Focus of blaming in replies containing multiple exclamation marks.

	Focus of blaming							
	Character		Behaviour		Outcome		Unclear	
Stay at home	10	11 %	40	45 %	14	16 %	25	28 %
Thanks	26	24 %	29	27 %	25	23 %	29	27 %
Total	36	18 %	69	35 %	39	20 %	54	27 %

@Boris Johnson. Do a proper lockdown and get these numbers down!!

@fmwales You need to strengthen the measures!!!

Examples of negative judgements of propriety instead focused on the failure of ministers to follow their own instructions and wasting public funds on initiatives that did not work, for instance:

@MattHancock WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED TO TRACK AND TRACE!!!! You spaffed millions of OUR MONEY on it!!!

@BorisJohnson pity you didn't heed your own advice before making a non essential trip to Scotland!!!!

4.3. Appraisal analysis of replies to specific politicians

The quantitative comparison of the presence, polarity and subtypes of Judgement was also conducted for a subset of the 600 replies to selected messages by politicians Matt Hancock, Dominic Raab, and Priti Patel. This analysis helps us to see how the blaming in responses to messages containing thanks compared with those containing the command to stay at home for different cabinet ministers.

4.3.1. Presence of judgement

The results (Table 11) showed there was more Judgement in the responses to thanks (194 instances) than in the responses to the command to stay at home (189 instances). This is due to slightly more positive judgement included in the responses to messages containing thanks (12 instances) than in the messages containing the directive to stay at home (two instances).

4.3.2. Basis of blaming

In line with the results of the evaluative keywords, and the sample of replies containing multiple exclamation marks, the bases of blaming strategies varied, with negative judgements of capacity being more prominent in responses to the directive to stay at home (Fig. 5). However, in this subset of the data, judgments of negative capacity and veracity occurred as almost equal proportions in the replies to messages containing thanks (36 % and 35 % respectively).

4.3.3. Focus of blaming

For the tweets responding to individual politicians, there was very little difference in how blaming was focused in replies to messages containing thanks compared with replies to messages containing the directive to stay at home (Table 12). The focus was largely similar, with just under a third of the negative judgement focused on behaviour, for instance:

Table 11
Quantitative comparison of Judgement in the replies to tweets from selected politicians.

	Total replies	Number of Judgements	Negative	Positive
Thanks	300	194	183	12
Stay at home	300	189	187	2

@DominicRaab Rollout is, unfortunately, proceeding at a very slow pace. Instead of **making empty promises**, use the lockdown to increase the number of vaccinations.

@MattHancock Wanna protect the NHS? **Throwing good money after bad.**

Just under a third of the blaming strategies focused on character, for example:

@DominicRaab **You are heartless.** The overall despair you are causing is nothing short of evil.

@PritiPatel Resign. **You're a bully** who incites acts of violence.

Just over a quarter focused on negative outcomes, for example:

@MattHancock **Shambles/u turns** all the way resign!

When the results for replies to the individual politicians are disaggregated, we found that overall, the negative judgement of Dominic Raab was equally distributed between character (32 %, n = 36), behaviour (32 %, n = 36), and outcome (32 %, n = 35) with 4 percent of the focus being unclear. Most of this blaming occurred in response to the directive (65 %, n = 72) rather than in response to thanks (35 %, n = 39). The negative judgement of Matt Hancock was slightly more focused on outcomes (34 %, n = 43) than behaviour (29 %, n = 37) or character (27 %, n = 34). Unlike Raab, most of the negative judgement towards Hancock occurred in response to the messages containing thanks (60 %, n = 75), rather than the messages containing the command to stay at home (40 %, n = 51). The patterns of blaming for Priti Patel are different once again, with outcomes being the focus half as often (17 %, n = 19) as either character (38 %, n = 42) or behaviour (38 %, n = 43). The blaming was equally distributed between her messages containing thanks (50 %, n = 56) and the directive to stay at home (50 %, n = 56).

The replies responding to Hancock suggest that the higher proportion of outcome-focused blaming was related to the details of the message he posted about the 'Test & Trace' service set up by the UK government as part of its strategy to contain the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Dido Harding was appointed as the head of this programme, a controversial decision given her lack of experience in public administration (Mahase, 2022). Hancock tweeted:

Thank you Dido and the whole NHS Test & Trace team keeping us safe this Christmas

The outcomes which were negatively evaluated in the replies to this tweet described the Test and Trace initiative as a 'failed system' and hence the claim that the test and trace team deserved thanks for 'keeping us safe' evaluated as 'lie(s)'. Indeed, subsequent government investigations found that the test and trace system to be ineffective (Wise, 2021), suggesting there were good grounds for the blaming in this case.

@MattHancock £12bn wasted on a **failed system**. Thanks Dido and Matt!

@MattHancock No one's "safe". So that's a **direct lie. Your privately run £22bn track, test and isolate system does not work.** It's just provided large profits for a few companies. We have a virulent new strain that's infecting thousands and **Dido Harding's system is a waste of money.**

In contrast to this, the character-focused blaming used to evaluate Priti Patel was not tied to the specific details of her messages but rather drew on decontextualised name-calling. For example, she was repeatedly referred to as a 'bully', subjected to nicknames such as 'Priti useless' and generalised as a 'liar, like all Tories'. Similar, decontextualised character-focused blaming also occurred for the male politicians, for example, claims that Raab and Hancock were 'evil', and that politicians as a general group were 'clowns', 'fascists', 'idiots' and that the government itself was 'shambolic'. However, the character-focused blaming occurred most often in response to messages posted by Priti Patel. Given

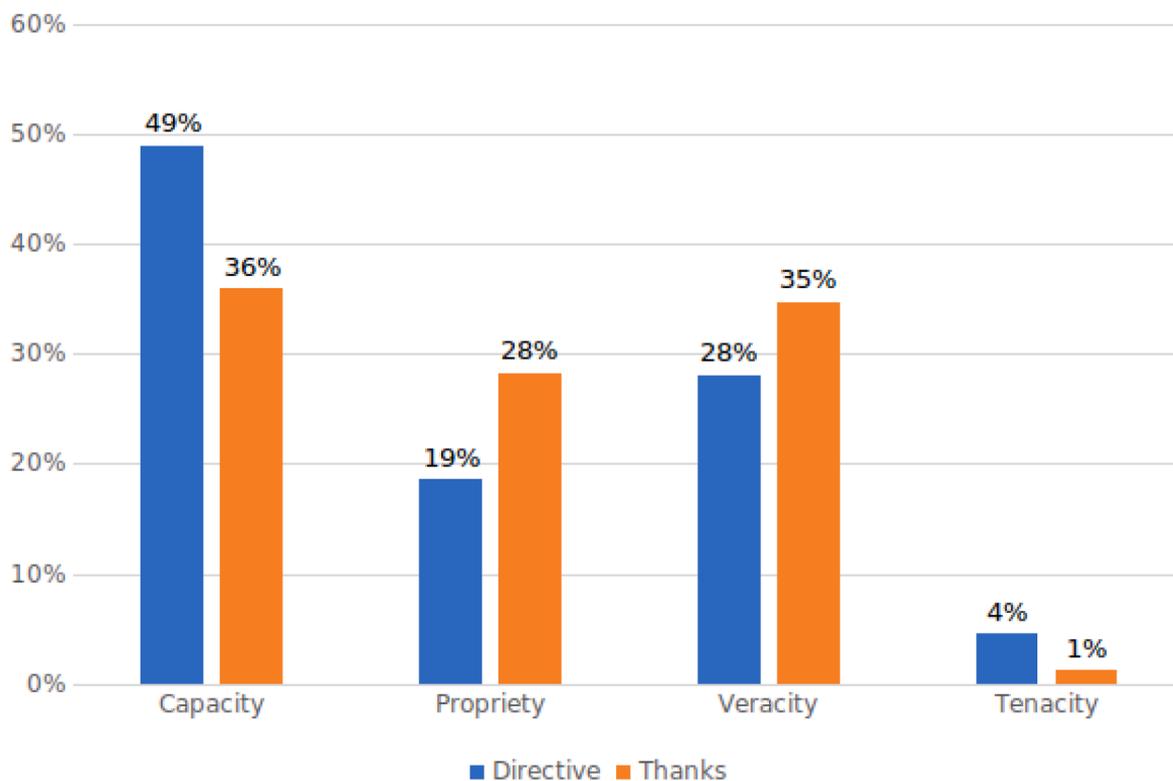


Fig. 5. Basis of blaming in responses to posts by selected politicians.

Table 12
Focus of blaming in responses to posts by selected politicians.

	Focus of blaming							
	Character		Behaviour		Outcome		Unclear	
<i>Stay at home</i>	62	32 %	63	33 %	48	25 %	20	10 %
<i>Thank</i>	60	31 %	60	31 %	54	28 %	18	9 %
Total	122	32 %	123	32 %	102	26 %	38	10 %

that character-focused blaming can be considered the most critical form of blaming, it would seem that Priti Patel was blamed most harshly.

5. Discussion

Our analysis has shown that while commands impose some measure of face-threat by restricting the freedom of the audience and thanking is usually recognised as a solidarity enhancing device, both types of messages elicited blaming as indicated through the evaluative keywords and the presence of negative judgement.

While we might have expected more blaming in response to the command to stay at home, in our data, there was no difference in the percentage of replies attracting negative judgement for the message types in tweets considered from three senior ministers. For the more affectively charged replies containing exclamation marks, 56 percent of the replies to thanking messages contained negative judgement, while 48 percent of the replies to commanding messages contained negative judgement. Far from building solidarity through promoting team spirit, thanking seems to elicit at least as much, if not more blaming language than did commands. The amount of positive judgement that aligned with the positive sentiment of the thanks was very modest.

The blaming strategies that were used in response to the command to stay at home showed a similar pattern across all three datasets, where negative judgement of capacity was the most frequent basis of blaming. The negative evaluation of capacity was most often focused on the behaviour of a person, where the directive to stay at home was either

considered as an inadequate action, or in the context of earlier actions which also were inadequate. This is in line with the division in the opinion polls at this time which viewed the lockdowns as either too little or too restrictive. The claims of the government’s inadequate actions were most prominent in the affectively charged replies that contained multiple exclamation marks, for instance:

@BorisJohnson It’s more important you step aside as PM and let those who know what their doing run the country..you’ve lost all credibility...your stance has almost bankrupt us killed more people than covid has and still your threatening us..well we do not want you as leader.....be gone!!

In contrast, the blaming strategies that were used in response to the tweets containing thanks varied. Although judgements of negative capacity were used, these did not occur as often as in the replies to commands. Instead, negative judgements of propriety (in evaluative keywords) and veracity (in the replies to individual politicians) were the most frequent bases of blaming. In the replies to thanks, the truthfulness of the politicians and their moral behaviour were particularly at stake. Experimental research indicates that the negative evaluation of veracity is perceived as more critical than that of capacity (Hansson et al., 2023), suggesting that untenable claims of success and false optimism may be highly damaging to a politician’s reputation.

Taken together, the results of our analysis suggest that there are two key risks for political leaders when communicating during a crisis. First, in the case of directives, the risk is not just that people will respond with reactance (Staunton et al., 2022) but that if the nature of the instructions given are considered inadequate, then blaming based on negative judgement of their capacity may lead to loss of credibility for the officeholders. Second, when the politician’s expression of thanks is perceived as insincere, manipulative or based on misinformation, then blaming based on negative judgement of veracity (e.g., accusations of dishonesty) may reduce public trust needed for crisis management (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021).

More generally, our findings demonstrate how one of the key

affordances of social media platforms – the possibility to interact directly with the accounts of government officeholders – shapes the discourses of political blame games. Previous studies have found that in Twitter, political congruence is likely to result in negative responses to out-group content (Wojcieszak et al., 2022) and that emotionally charged news would be more likely to increase distrust (Hasell, 2021). Given that the audience design of Twitter means that thanking in this data was directed towards third parties (such as the police services and the national health service), but evaluated negatively by the auditors (that is, members of the wider public, not members of those public services), it may well be that the predisposition towards blaming is particularly heightened in Twitter. Further research comparing blaming patterns across platforms would be needed to explore the mediated implications of this in more detail.

Methodologically, our study has shown the value of a corpus-assisted dialogic approach to analysing blame games. Looking at three subsets of data where the blaming strategies used by people in response to the posts by political leaders provide a nuanced view of the criticism targeted towards the UK government during a key period of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have suggested that the intensity of blaming strategies on social media can be analysed by paying attention to the use of punctuation. The methods in this study can be adapted to explore how people respond to political and corporate messages on social media in other contexts and about other topics. Future research could also provide comparative analysis across national contexts, take into account additional characteristics such as the minister's gender, and explore responses to other kinds of speech acts beyond directives and expressives.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ruth Page: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Sten Hansson:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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