Article

COVID-19 and figures of blame: Discursive representations of blame for COVID-19 and its impacts in UK online news

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Abstract

As publics have attempted to make sense of the COVID-19 crisis and its longer-term impacts there has been an inevitable search for blame. Emergent research on the attribution of blame has focussed exclusively on the initial outbreak, with insufficient attention paid to how countries have responded to the pandemic. Our study adopts a longitudinal approach, examining the figures of blame that emerged across the UK's experience of COVID-19, including subsequent waves of COVID-19. By sampling articles from three online UK news outlets (BBC; The Guardian; Mail Online), we analyse the linguistic elements and discourse strategies that contribute to the representation of specific actors as figures of blame in news coverage of COVID-19. To identify actors and their representations we focus on three elements: (1) direct, indirect or implied reference to an actor; (2) an expression of anger, resentment or frustration towards this actor; (3) textual and discursive features that nominate agency for their actions or inaction for a negative outcome. Our analysis shows that three prominent figures of blame emerged across the period of analysis. The primary actor represented as a figure of blame was the UK government. This, we argue, differs from the initial phases of the outbreak where there was an emphasis on externalising blame. We also found, however, that the public and the

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individual were constructed as figures of blame. For the latter it was through an emphasis on personal responsibility in the adoption of preventative behaviours and in following COVID-19 restrictions. We conclude the paper by exploring the significance of these findings for the communicative dynamics of the pandemic.

Introduction

Periods of instability, change and uncertainty are intertwined with questions concerning responsibility and blame. Are specific individuals, institutions or organisations at fault for a crisis and its consequences? When there is a perception that external factors or others are accountable due to their omission, errors or failure, blame is often assigned to these actors.

Theories and approaches to blame are diverse, encompassing cognitive, emotional, social and moral perspectives. Cognitive approaches emphasise blame as an evaluative judgement (Tognazzini and Coates, 2021). Others suggest that rather than being a matter of judgement, blame is an emotional response, grounded in an expression of negative feelings such as anger and resentment towards an actor (Tognazzini and Coates, 2021; Wallace, 1994). From a moral perspective, blame may be a 'social tool' that regulates others' behaviour (Monroe and Malle, 2018).

As publics have attempted to make sense of the COVID-19 crisis and its impacts there has been an inevitable search for blame. We know that in the early phases of the pandemic, blame was ascribed to China and this fuelled xenophobia, racism and violence towards people of Asian descent (Karalis Noel, 2020; Roberto et al., 2020). From other crisis contexts, it has been observed that there is a tendency to allocate blame to the government or individual decision-makers for failures and omissions in their policy response (Malhotra and Kuo, 2008).

This study seeks to differentiate between evaluations of blame for the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and blame expressed towards actors for the impacts of COVID-19 on the UK. It adopts a longitudinal perspective running from February 2020 up until February 2022. Specifically, it seeks to identify those actors identified and constructed as figures of blame, a concept first set out by Atlani-Duault et al. (2015) to recognise how certain groups (social others), institutions (government or organisations) or structures (elites) have historically been blamed during epidemics and disease outbreaks, in UK online news coverage of the pandemic and the discursive processes that contribute to these representations. To this end, it articulates an approach that focusses on three elements. First, the identification of an actor; second, an expression of anger, resentment or frustration towards this actor; and third, textual and discursive features that nominate agency or causality to this actor for a negative outcome. This may be through the actions or inaction of a nominated actor.

Foundations of blame

In the wake of government failures, for example in response to disaster, economic challenges and security threats, citizens will use relevant information to mitigate partisan bias and determine responsibility amongst different political actors (Malhotra and Kuo, 2008). In modern politics, when policies are contested, actors may attempt to deflect blame (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl, 2019). Shifting blame, for example to an external actor, may be necessary for governments to sustain support for their policies (Schlipphak et al., 2022).

It is also important to recognise the distinction between self-blame, blaming oneself and externalising blame. Johnson et al. (2002) suggest that people will attribute their failures to environmental factors but will often blame the individual when judging others. This is illustrated by the notion of victim blaming where individuals emphasise personal attributes in their judgement of others, where 'individuals who suffer are held responsible for their own predicaments' (Mulford et al., 1996: 1324). In certain situations, therefore, people blame an individual, often the victim, rather than society, for a negative outcome (Johnson et al., 2002). This is a common feature when appropriating blame for the causes and responsibility of disease, for example (Curtin et al., 2021).

The dynamics of blame have been shown to be present during epidemics as publics attempt to identify human actions that have contributed to the spread of disease (Farmer, 2006). Blame enables people to make sense of an epidemic and avoid responsibility (Hewlett and Hewlett, 2007). People may project the risk of infection and its consequences to 'the other' due to the 'powerlessness' they experience during a health crisis (Eichelberger, 2007; Joffe, 2011).

One of the characteristics of blame attribution during health crises is that in the early phases of the crisis and where the threat is perceived to be distant blame is projected towards 'the other' (Sontag, 1978 cited in Logie and Turan, 2020). Epidemics have also, increasingly, become understood in relation to globalisation and migration and are reflected through the concept of borders (Warren et al., 2010). The consequence of cultural blame is to both legitimise the causes of an epidemic and reinforce health inequalities in marginalised populations (Eichelberger, 2007). Das (2020) argues that it is important to recognise that stigmatisation of social groups and communities for certain diseases serve as a barrier to global development. Such discourses on distant health crises are a consequence of historical, economic and political factors that stigmatise communities that experience disease outbreaks (Eichelberger, 2007). As a crisis evolves, however, and people are directly affected by its impacts, blame shifts towards other actors, those with responsibility for managing the crisis, such as the government and health authorities (Mayor et al., 2013; Roy et al., 2020).

Media dynamics of blame during public health crises

News media are significant during public health crises since they circulate dominant narratives and frameworks for interpreting their causes and consequences (Eichelberger, 2007; Herzlich and Pierret, 1989; Joffe and Haarhoff, 2002; Kasperson et al., 2013;

Ungar, 1998). Research shows that media have also tended to represent the distant other as a figure of blame for the emergence of an epidemic. Often this is by focussing on the inadequacies in health infrastructure or emphasising cultural and social practices. The distant 'other' may be positioned as inferior to the Global North attributing the emergence and progression of epidemics to social conditions that contribute to the spread of disease (Roy et al., 2020; Ungar, 1998). UK newspapers, for example, were found to have represented Ebola as an 'African disease' and associated it with 'African practices' (Joffe and Haarhoff, 2002: 967).

When considering research on news media coverage of COVID-19, Barreneche (2020) found that blame was attributed to a range of collective actors and in different contexts. Aligning with previous research on the construction of the other in epidemics, in the early phases of the pandemic there was a rise in stigmatisation and prejudice towards people of Asian descent, with race and ethnicity being used to identify and blame those perceived to be carriers and transmitting the virus (Nguyen et al., 2021; Roberto et al., 2020). Those that criticised travel restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 argued that they contributed to such stigma and xenophobia by reinforcing the social construction of COVID-19 as a foreign invasion (Logie and Turan, 2020). Other analyses of news media coverage of COVID-19 identified the prominence of fear and scaremongering frames (Ogbodo et al., 2020), the amplification of future risks (Rooke, 2021) and the adoption of positions that appeal to individual accountability (Lövenmark et al., 2023).

More recently, researchers have turned to social media to examine the dynamics of communication around health crises (Roy et al., 2020; Shahid et al., 2020). Research analysing the dynamics of online blame during the 2015 H1N1 pandemic identified that accusations were made towards certain groups (Atlani-Duault et al., 2020). Choli and Kuss (2021) examined the characteristics of blame for COVID-19 through January to March 2020 by examining keywords and phrases in a multilingual Twitter dataset, identifying that in the initial phases of the pandemic blame attribution was most often to conspiracy theories and the restriction of information by government. As the pandemic progressed, however, blame was focussed on political leaders and the media, which is indicative of the mistrust amongst publics towards governments and their handling of the crisis.

When applying the concept of news framing to blame attribution, which Entman (1993) defines as rendering aspects of perceived reality to promote a particular problem, definition or casual explanation, blame may serve to reduce societal problems to 'the blameless us' versus 'the culprit them' (Hameleers et al., 2018: 383). De la Torre (2010) argues that populist blame attribution is positioned as a conflict between elites or societal out-groups and the (good) public. A study in Australia examining news media coverage of panic buying during COVID-19 indicates that lower socio-economic and ethnically diverse consumers were blamed disproportionately. This was evident through dehumanising language, with those engaging in panic-buying described as selfish and shameful (Phillips et al., 2021).

While there is emergent research evidence on the attribution of blame during the early phase of the pandemic, in particular the initial outbreak (Lövenmark et al., 2023; Ogbodo et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2021; Rooke, 2021), and the dynamics of blame

attribution on social media (Choli and Kuss, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021), limited attention has been paid to understanding blame in subsequent waves of the virus and as countries attempted to respond to the pandemic. Our study, therefore, seeks to consider the figures of blame beyond the early phase of the pandemic, which as established is often characterised by externalising blame, to consider subsequent waves of the virus and the UK's response to the crisis. We analyse how actors are identified and the linguistic and discursive elements that contribute to their construction and representation as figures of blame in news coverage of COVID-19 and address the following questions: RQ1: Which actors are identified as figures of blame for COVID-19, the continuation of the pandemic and its impacts? RQ2: How are these actors constructed and represented as figures of blame in news discourse? RQ3: What are the textual and discursive elements that contribute to these representations?

Data and analytical approach

As part of a larger project on COVID-19 news coverage, we conducted an initial mapping analysis to identify online news articles about COVID-19 published in three online news outlets: the BBC, The Guardian and Mail Online. We chose these three outlets as all are among the top five most frequently accessed news websites in the UK but also reflect the diversity of the UK media landscape, including a public service broadcaster (BBC) and both right (Mail Online) and left-leaning (The Guardian) outlets.

A series of key happenings occurring between February 2020 and February 2022 were identified to produce an initial sample of news articles, representing 100 days of the UK's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. These happenings included: the announcement of the UK's first national lockdown in 2020 (23rd March 2020); the rollout of the UK's vaccine programme (8th December 2020); the identification of new variants of concern (19th December 2020); and the UK's subsequent Omicron wave (6th November 2021). Using the Wayback Machine internet archive, the first three prominent COVID-19 stories were captured for each sample day from the three news outlets. This produced an initial sample of 900 news articles. Each article was coded for a selection of variables to aid the sifting and identification of relevant articles for analysis. These included: story focus (domestic, foreign or unclear) and article type (news or comment/opinion). Since the research questions in this study focus on UK discourses of blame, articles coded as foreign news were excluded. All article types (including comment and opinion) were included, and all topic themes (COVID-19-related news stories) were included. Following this sifting process, a randomised selection of 50 articles drawn from each of the three news outlets were selected for analysis.

As other scholars have shown (Fairclough, 2001; van Dijk, 2015; Wodak and Reisigl, 2015) the linguistic features of news texts are shaped by and reflect the discursive practices of journalism. These include the institutional and professional contexts and the broader public and political discourse in which news is produced. In this study, we focussed on identifying the figures of blame emerging in news texts for the continuation of COVID-19 and its impacts. We also sought to understand how blame was articulated, constructed and justified.

Our analysis proceeded through three overlapping stages. First, through a close reading of all articles, two coders undertook an inductive analysis to identify actors emerging as figures of blame. To this end we focussed on three linguistic and discursive elements that evidence blame towards an actor: (1) direct, indirect or implied reference to an actor; (2) an expression of anger, resentment or frustration towards this actor; (3) an indication of causality that their actions or inaction have or will contribute to a negative outcome. Both coders met frequently to discuss the actors, linguistic and discourse elements that contribute to these representations of figures of blame. The next step was for the two coders to review a minimum of 10 articles coded by each other. This enabled us to discuss the emerging figures of blame from the sample, relevant textual, linguistic and discursive elements and any discrepancies. The third and final stage of analysis involved returning to conduct a further analysis of the selected articles where figures of blame were identified and to isolate extracts from the texts.

To identify those actors represented as figures of blame our analysis draws on Van Leeuwen's (1996) approach to the classification and representation of social actors in news texts. This recognises how social actors can be both functional, identified and represented by the functions they fulfil, such as social categories, and relational, with actors represented in their position to others (Van Leeuwen, 2008). As a framework, it has also been used to identify how exclusion, suppression and backgrounding of social actors may obscure responsibility for their negative actions (Hansson, 2015).

In analysing the linguistic forms and discursive strategies in the selected articles we noted nomination strategies, how groups of people are represented and predication strategies, where positive or negative evaluations of actors are presented through descriptive characteristics, such as adjectives and adjectival phrases. Particular attention was paid to those characteristics that indicated anger, resentment and frustration expressed towards an actor. We were also interested in the processes that assign causality to an actor for a negative outcome, which may include the nomination of an actor for a negative outcome or lexical items and phrases that imply responsibility.

Since our focus is on news, we also recognise the practices that shape journalistic discourse. The most significant is a consideration of the identification of actors and the attribution of blame by sources. When identifying actors in news texts it is imperative to acknowledge the distinction between those that are made evident through citing the accounts and perspectives provided by sources and those that are through the 'authorial voice' of the journalist (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

Representing figures of blame

Three prominent figures of blame were identified across the sampled news texts. The first was the UK government represented as a figure of blame for its perceived inaction and mismanagement in the UK's pandemic response. Second, was to the individual, represented through the personal responsibility of the individual to adopt preventative behaviours that reduce transmission of COVID-19 and to follow COVID restrictions and guidance. The final actor was young people, in a similar vein through emphasising how their actions may contribute to the spread of the virus.

The government

Through the course of the sample period, a range of different news stories, issues and events demonstrated how the government as an actor was characterised as a figure of blame.

Blame was first evident during the initial phases of the pandemic, as concerns were raised about the government's slow decision-making and its reticence to implement a lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. This is illustrated by extract 1, from an article published by the Mail Online in February 2020.

> *After being branded a 'part-time prime minister' for his slow response, he reassured the public that he had held meetings with the health secretary and chief medical officer, who broke the news of the country's 20th case.*
>
> *[. . .] But furious politicians slammed the 'part-time' Prime Minister, saying it shouldn't take three days for the meeting to take place, while former chancellor George Osborne demanded that the government go on a 'war footing' to reassure the 'fearful' public with regular Cobra meetings and daily press briefings.*

Extract 1: *Mail Online*, 29 February 2020

In this extract, which reports growing public unease at increasing case numbers, it describes anger expressed both towards the prime minister and the government for their inaction. Politicians are described using the adjective *furious*, with the verb *slammed* used to report their views concerning the slow pace of decision-making. This demonstrates a strength of anger and suggests a shared perspective amongst politicians from across the political spectrum. While this extract indicates anger towards the prime minister, with the opening paragraph from the extract using the adjective phrase '*part-time*' to describe his inaction, a later quote, attributed to George Osborne, a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, shifts the emphasis towards the collective and the need for government action. Causality for the negative outcome, which in this example is rising case numbers, is articulated through the source's emphasis on the government's delay in convening Cobra: the UK's civil contingencies committee. This is achieved using the lexical phase '*war footing*' which denotes the need to prioritise the crisis and set aside other concerns.

In a similar manner, the second extract from The Guardian represents the government as a figure of blame for early failings. Here, an expert source is quoted criticising a lack of '*preparation and openness from the government*'. The use of the verb *lambasted* when introducing the quotation serves to underline the strength of criticism. Within the quote, there are lexical items that intimate frustration and anger towards the government, including the use of the adjective *pathetic* and noun *failing*. In this extract responsibility for a lack of preparedness (the negative outcome) is attributed to the government. This is achieved by identifying and activating the government as the collective actor responsible for insufficient preparation, failures in responding to the crisis and a lack of understanding (of public health).

Prof John Ashton, a former regional director of public health for north-west England, lambasted a lack of preparation and openness from the government [. . .]

[. . .] He accused the government of failing to understand public health, which has been undermined over the past 10 years

[. . .] "This virus will find the weak points. You can't just plan this from an office in Whitehall. It's pathetic. The government doesn't seem to understand classic public health."

Extract 2: *The Guardian*, 12 March 2020.

Beyond the initial wave of the virus, the government was also blamed for other failures in the UK's pandemic response. There is a range of different examples that emerged across the study period. Most significant were rising infection rates through the summer of 2020, the high death toll in care homes and the introduction of localised and tiered lockdown restrictions.

Extracts three and four below illustrate the nomination of the government as a figure of blame for deaths in care homes. In extract three, from a report carried by the BBC published in July 2020, the government is blamed for the high death toll in care homes. In this extract there are references to an actor who had not '*thought about the challenge*' and when deaths increased to such an extent it became something '*they couldn't ignore*'. The collective actor implied here but not named is the government for omissions in its policy response. In this example, anger is indicated as the reporter introduces the quote, summarised as a situation '*that angers*' the source. It is also evident through the lexical items in the quotation, where the quoted source describes their assessment of the consequences of (government) inaction as *brutal*. In addition, the phrase *body count*, a militaristic term, is used to communicate and visualise the consequences of government policy towards care homes. This serves to both emphasise anger and the implications of this negative outcome.

More than 3,300 residents died in England and Wales. At its worst, 540 died in a single day. It's a situation that angers Mark Adams from Community Integrated Care - the charity that runs EachStep Blackley. "Nobody really thought about the challenge that care organisations were going to face until, if I'm being brutal, the body count became so high they couldn't ignore it."

Extract 3: *BBC*, 30 July 2020

In extract 4, drawn from an article published by the BBC, which includes both direct and indirect testimony from a representative of the care sector, the government-issued guidance to care homes is described as *atrocious*. Despite the source's statement negating their own feelings, frustration (towards the government) is indicated through a summary of the source's assessment, which describes a *dire situation*. In this extract, however, the government is indirectly implicated as an actor through reference to its issued guidance.

Care home owner Anita Astle described the situation as dire [. . .] *She says the government guidance was atrocious and believes social care was overlooked at the start. "We were clapping for the NHS, we were hearing 'protect our NHS', but there was nothing about social care. It's probably a sad state of affairs that I don't feel angry. I just feel that's the norm."*

Extract 4: *BBC*, 14 April 2021

Blame was also expressed towards the government for the introduction of new tiered lockdown restrictions in November 2020 and the decision to implement these restrictions prior to Christmas. In extracts five and six that follow below, both from articles published by The Guardian, the government is activated as a figure of blame due to its failure to reduce transmission of the virus. In extract five anger (towards the government) is expressed through reference to 'a *starkly-worded letter*' from Conservative members from both chambers. While the reports explain that the letter was sent to the prime minister, the collective responsibility of the government is activated through the verbal processes that shift emphasis to the government as the actor that must prove '*new restrictions will save more lives than they cost*'. It is also presented through a direct quote from the letter that indicates causality and that the negative outcome (further restrictions) will have significant health and economic costs.

In a starkly worded letter to the prime minister, 70 Tory MPs from the newly formed Covid Recovery Group said the government must prove the new restrictions "will save more lives than they cost".

The letter, also signed by 14 Conservative peers, told Johnson that a tiered system "infringes deeply upon people's lives with huge health and economic costs".

They wrote: "We cannot support this approach further unless the government demonstrates the restrictions proposed for after 2 December will have an impact on slowing the transmission of Covid, and will save more lives than they cost.

Extract 5: *The Guardian*, 24 November 2020

Later in the period of analysis, and as reporting turned to consider how institutions and organisations responded to the public health emergency, the conduct of the prime minister and individual ministers came under scrutiny. One story of particular significance that emerged in December 2021 involved allegations that senior members of government had attended social gatherings in 2020 in breach of lockdown restrictions. In the initial reporting of these claims, criticism and anger towards the prime minister were aired in reports. There was, however, also an activation in the reports that articulated blame towards the government. In extract 6 we see this foregrounded in the reporting of questions raised by a Labour member of parliament in the House of Commons that asked, '*will the government just be straight with the British people?*' Anger is also expressed through the direct quotation from this source, who describes the feelings of the UK public as they have learned about social gatherings in Whitehall despite COVID restrictions.

She also asked: "Are there more parties that we need to hear about?" "People across the country are angry," Ms Anderson said, adding: "Will the government just be straight with the British people?"

Extract 6: *BBC*, 9 December 2021

The individual

The second prominent actor identified as a figure of blame was the individual, assigned this role through the representation of the individual and their responsibilities to adopt behaviours that reduce transmission of the virus and to follow COVID restrictions and guidance. In contrast to attributions to the government, expressions of anger and frustration towards the individual were weaker. Instead, blame was premised on establishing a causal link between the individual and the consequences of their actions.

Extract 7, drawn from an article published in The Guardian, demonstrates how the individual is represented as a figure of blame. In this excerpt, which is part of a broader article discussing the prospects of a second wave, a direct quote from a public health expert explains that responsibility lies with the public to stop the UK's public health system from being overwhelmed. This attribution of responsibility (to the individual and their actions) is veiled behind key public health messages around vaccination and behavioural changes. The activation of an individual as an actor occurs first through the shift in perspective from the reporter to the first person, noting how an individual may query '*why do I have to wear a face mask*'. The subject then returns to the source and their response to the question in the form of advice and guidelines. While there are frequent references to the public (as a collective), with references to *they* and *their* responsibilities, in particular the importance of adopting preventative behaviours through the winter, the individual and their responsibilities are also activated through the instructive tone and lexical items that highlight the importance of *preparation*, *behaviour* and *risk* reduction. These are incumbent on the individual, with the failure to heed these warnings set out as likely to contribute to the negative outcome of further waves of COVID-19 and the consequences of this for the UK's health system.

> *"People might think Covid is over with, why do I have to wear a face mask," she said. "But it isn't over. We still have Covid patients in intensive care. If the public don't physically distance and don't wear face coverings we could very quickly get back to where we were earlier this year."*
>
> *[. . .] MacEwen said doctors were now relying on the public to help avert a "perfect storm" hitting the health system this winter. [. . .] She added: "The most important thing about being prepared for this winter is the population gets the flu vaccine if they need it and they behave in a way that reduces the risk of them catching Covid [. . .] "It is down to the public again," said Pittard. "They are vital in this."*

Extract 7: *The Guardian*, 20 July 2020

We see a similar tone adopted in extract 8, also from an article published in The Guardian, which reported the likelihood of further restrictions and the need for restraint over Christmas. Through a direct quote from a statement by the prime minister, there is an emphasis on personal responsibility to reduce social contact over the Christmas period. This is illustrated by the nomination of the individual as an actor and asking us to '*think about our elderly relatives'*. Given the well-documented risk profile for severe COVID, where it was established in the early phases of the pandemic that older people were more susceptible to severe disaster, this activation of the individual and their own responsibilities is underscored by asking *us* to think about our own relatives and families.

> "*What we're saying to people now, over this Christmas period, is think of those rules about the three households that you can bubble up with, the five days – that is very much a maximum, that is not a target that people should aim for," Johnson told Sky News. "This is the time to think about our elderly relatives, avoid spreading the disease. Keep it short, keep it small. Have yourselves a very little Christmas.*"

Extract 8: *The Guardian*, 19 December 2020

In extract 9, a direct quote from the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, expresses a stronger tone to warn the public of the consequences of travelling against lockdown guidelines. In this extract, his quote conveys anger towards those (individuals) that are flouting guidelines, whom he describes as *totally irresponsible*. Through this quote, there is also a reference to a previous statement from the Chief Medical Officer, which nominates the individual and their responsibility to '*follow the rules'*. The subsequent reference to the individual '*playing their part'*, suggests that those who ignore guidelines and therefore fail to demonstrate personal responsibility will lead to (the negative outcomes of) increasing rates of transmission, further deaths from COVID-19 and additional restrictions.

> *Mr Hancock told Sky News' Sophy Ridge: 'This was clearly totally irresponsible behaviour, and the Chief Medical Officer was absolutely clear that people should unpack their bags if they have them packed.' I think that it's relatively small numbers and the vast majority of people in the pandemic have followed the rules and played their part.*

Extract 9: *Mail Online*, 20 December 2020

In extract 10, also taken from an article in the Mail Online and that reported the likelihood of further restrictions, blame towards the individual and their actions is similarly represented through a direct quote from the Health Secretary. In his remark there is a causal link drawn between the actions of individuals, and how they behave, and the likely success of tiered lockdown measures in reducing transmission rates of the virus. There are references to both individual behaviours and '*how people act'*. Frustration towards individuals is implied through the curt description of behaviour and the inclusion of the adverb *frankly*, which serves to underline the significance of personal responsibility. A causal link to the failure of the individual to follow these guidelines and the negative outcome of further restrictions or additional police powers is also evident.

(Matt Hancock) insisted the problem was partly down to people failing to obey the rules, amid calls from some MPs for police to be given more powers.

Challenged on Sky News over whether Tier 4 restrictions work, Mr Hancock said: 'It is down to people's behaviour, frankly. What matters is, yes of course, the rules that we put in place, but it is also about how people act.

Extract 10: *Mail Online*, 4 January 2021

The final extract from an opinion piece published in The Guardian offers a critique of government policy and the politics of the pandemic. The columnist questions whether too great a burden has been placed on the individual in the UK's response to the pandemic. Through exploring this issue, the piece cites examples, as shown in the extract below, of how a lack of individual responsibility may have contributed to the UK's infection rate and its consequences. This article, published in October 2021, is drawn from a later period in the sample and is looking back at the UK's experience of the pandemic. Causality is articulated through a description of '*England's failure to control the virus*' and indirectly, therefore, the continuation of the pandemic. Anger and frustration are implied in this example through the author's descriptions of public behaviour, where people are described behaving as if the '*pandemic is over*'.

[. . .] many people are acting as if the pandemic is over – or at least, over for them. Mask-wearing and social distancing have sometimes become so rare that to practise them feels embarrassing.

[. . .] England has become one of the worst places for infections in the world, despite a high degree of vaccination by global standards. Case numbers, hospitalisations and deaths are all rising, and are already much higher than in other western European countries that have kept measures such as indoor mask-wearing compulsory, and where compliance with such rules has remained strong. What does England's failure to control the virus through "personal responsibility" say about our society?

Extract 11: *The Guardian*, 22 October 2021

Young people

As follows from the individual and their personal responsibility, young people were also represented as a figure of blame in the sampled texts for their failure to obey restrictions that aimed to reduce transmission of the virus. While less prominent than the previous actors, young people, were blamed for further COVID-19 cases and the consequences that would follow from this, such as further restrictions on social contact.

In extract 12 below, drawn from an article in the Mail Online reporting the prevalence of the virus, there is a quote attributed to the Health Secretary that directly blames young people for increasing rates of COVID-19. Causality, in this example, is due to a perception that young people are failing to heed social distancing rules that will lead to a further

wave of the virus. As an indirect quotation, there is no discernible evidence of anger or frustration, instead in paraphrasing the comment, the authorial voice of the journalist describes how the health secretary 'pointed the finger at young people'. It is important to note that in the subsequent sentence there is recognition that blame may be ineffective and may contribute to a negative outcome. This theme is expanded on later, where the reporter poses a question asking whether blame may be counterproductive and alludes to the consequences of attributing blame to particular social actors. The two lexical expressions within the reporter's account pointed the finger and blame game, are also indicative of a critical reading of the health secretary's statement. Pointing the finger suggests that the claim reported in the quote is an accusation and one that is unfounded. The phrase blame game indicates an appraisal of the quote shows an attempt by the health secretary to deflect from other contributing factors.

> *Before introducing new rules banning private gatherings of more than six people, the health secretary pointed the finger at young people for increasing rates of coronavirus. But could a blame game be counterproductive?*

> *[. . .] the health secretary, Matt Hancock, warned there could be a second wave of the virus if young people did not follow social distancing rules. But was he right to single out young people, among whom coronavirus appears to be spreading fastest?*

> Extract 12: Mail Online, 21 May 2021

A further article, also from the Mail Online, highlights a letter from psychologists sent to the Health Secretary that warned that 'shaming the young' may have an impact on behaviours and consequently attempts to reduce transmission of the virus. In extract 13 quotes, attributed to expert sources, address how young people have been represented as figures of blame. This article also included a quote from the Prime Minister that restates the claims presented in the previous extract by encouraging '*young people to consider their behaviour*' for the sake of their '*parents' and grandparents' health'*.

> *Blaming young people for a spike in Covid-19 cases could encourage them to dump social distancing entirely, leading psychologists have warned.*

> *In a letter to Matt Hancock, they say 'shaming' the young could have the complete opposite effect to the one intended, causing them to disengage entirely from efforts to stem the spread of Covid and trigger a wave of new cases.*

> *The 50 psychologists called on ministers to 'reframe' their coronavirus statements and be far more 'sensitive and understanding' of the public's emotional state.*

> *Boris Johnson warned young people to consider their behaviour 'for the sake of your parents' and grandparents' health' last week after a spike in cases was recorded.*

> Extract 13: *Mail Online*, 16 September 2020.

Also evident in the sample was the representation of students as a figure of blame. As a social actor this group can be described as a functional and an associative actor to young people (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 42). Students are a functional role since it describes a collective group by their occupation. As actor students are also associated with younger people due to their demographic characteristics, with 78% of students enrolled at UK higher education institutions during 2020–2021 under the age of 30 (Higher Education Student Statistics, 2023).

In extract 14 below from an article published by the BBC that reported the situation in Birmingham as infection rates began to rise in October 2020, a quote is included from a student that refers to blame attributed to students for the *spike* in infections in the city. In this example the source expresses frustration that infections will rise due to the use of incorrect tests by the City Council and that blame for this outcome will be attributed to students. Causality for the negative outcome (rise in infections) is nominated to students in this example by the quoted source acknowledging how they (as students) had become a figure of blame. The closing expression, however, *'it's not our fault'* positions the speaker as representing the voice of students and challenging these assessments.

> *Ms Ashbridge added: "Obviously students have sort of been blamed for the spike and now it's probably going to rise potentially further because of this mix-up and it's not our fault." A city council spokesperson said: "As soon as it became apparent that the wrong tests had been given out, steps were taken immediately to rectify the mistake.*

Extract 14: *BBC*, 14 October 2020

Further discussion and conclusions

In our analysis, we aimed to identify the actors represented in news texts as figures of blame for the continuation of COVID-19 and its impacts. To identify figures of blame, we focussed on three representational and discursive elements. First, expressions of anger or frustration, whether this is through the authorial voice of the journalist, or through direct quotation from a source. Second, the identification of an actor to whom this is directed towards. Finally, strategies that identify, nominate or associate failure, inaction or omission by this actor for a negative outcome.

By examining articles drawn from the BBC, The Guardian and Mail Online, three prominent figures of blame emerged across the period of analysis. The primary actor represented as a figure of blame was the UK government. While the analysis indicates an emphasis on the institution of government, as a collective, for its failures in its pandemic response, there is also an indication of culpability articulated towards individual ministers, most significantly the incumbent prime minister. An avenue for further research would be to examine the contrasts between representations of the government, and its collective responsibility, and blame attributed to the prime minister and other senior cabinet ministers. Our analysis also shows that the expressions of blame towards the UK government were more often through the voice of sources than the accounts or descriptions by reporters. This aligns with what is known about the role of sources and their significance in shaping news discourse (Chadwick, 2017), with sources used to present

different positions and perspectives on an issue. It is important to recognise, however, that sources will have their own agendas, for example oppositional voices will be critical of government policy, and the linguistic and discursive processes that serve to appropriate blame.

While actors represented as figures of blame were more often collectivised, when emphasising the behaviour of ordinary people, there was a tendency towards individualisation, an emphasis on personal responsibility and accounts that illustrate individual experiences. This is a further feature of news discourse.

Given the significance of the news media these findings have several implications for public communication about COVID-19. Through the UK's experience of COVID-19, the social actor constructed and represented as a figure of blame was young people. This may be a consequence of the pandemic and its impacts emphasising the sociodemographic characteristics of age. Age was a significant risk factor for COVID-19 and restrictions introduced to curb transmission of the virus that aimed to reduce social mixing had a disproportionate impact on young people (Widnall et al., 2022). It may also explain why other social groups were not identified in this study as prominent figures of blame, contrary to what was found in other research and during the earlier phases of the pandemic.

Finally, while the UK government was most prominent, we also found that the public and the individual were constructed as figures of blame. This aligns with findings of the research examining media discourse in Sweden that found that news coverage adopted positions that accentuate individual accountability during COVID-19 (Lövenmark et al., 2023). While this may be reflective of the wider public health messaging around COVID-19, for example those that stressed the importance of individual preventative behaviours, it may also deflect from institutional and organisational accountability in the UK's pandemic response. This tension may be a consideration for public health messaging during future epidemics and disease outbreaks.

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