'Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives'

A Critical Discourse Analysis of UK Government Covid-19 press conferences

Morwenna Backhouse

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global crisis which resulted in monumental shifts in behavioural norms, communicative practices, and power balances within socioeconomic structures. Through the case study of the pandemic, this dissertation seeks to illuminate how populist rhetoric shaped British Government public health communication and how these public health messages were framed to further ideological perceptions.

Applying Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model, a Critical Discourse Analysis was conducted on twenty Government Covid-19 press conferences between March 2020 and July 2021, identifying textual and discursive features, and drawing out the relationship between texts and broader social contexts. Drawing upon wider theoretical concepts, the analysis reveals the ways in which populist discourses were presented by Government through the mobilisation of war metaphors, fundamentally exclusionary discourses of nationalism and the use of emotional appeals through language of affect. These narratives were advanced by politicians employing a populist communication style and utilising political marketing techniques to 'package' public health messages into buzzwords and slogans. It is argued that the interplay between the promotion of populist rhetoric and the 'packaging' of public health messages contributed towards a political strategy which sought to legitimate the Government's actions, deflect blame, and stabilise power whilst generating appropriate reactions to public health guidance.

INTRODUCTION

On the 31st December 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) picked up reports in Wuhan, China of 'a cluster of cases of pneumonia of an unknown cause' (WHO, 2020a). On the 9th January 2020, WHO reported that Chinese authorities determined the outbreak was caused by a 'novel Coronavirus'. On the 30th January 2020, the WHO Director-General declared the Coronavirus 'a public health emergency of international concern' (WHO, 2020b). Fast forward almost two months later, on the 23rd March at the country's tenth Coronavirus (Covid-19) press conference briefing, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, announced the UK's first national lockdown.

Since these seminal moments we have seen how the Coronavirus public health crisis has impacted, and will continue to shape economic, political, and social structures across the globe for a significant period to come. We therefore need to understand how messages were conveyed and how narratives evolved through this unprecedented global crisis. As humanity adjusts to a post-Covid-19 landscape these narratives will undoubtedly be challenged and contested. However, in pursuit of understanding the potential global structural shifts we might experience in the aftermath of the pandemic, there is something to gleaned from starting at the start, seeking to understand the world's initial response. Hence, the rationale for this project, an analysis of the UK Government's Coronavirus press conference communication.

Not just an international public health crisis, the pandemic can be seen as a 'powerful new centripetal force that concentrates power in the hands of those who already have it' (Naím, 2022: 230). Further, it is well theorised that populism and populist leaders thrive in volatile and changing socio-economic contexts (see Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Laclau, 2018; Hawkins *et al.*, 2017). It is through this lens that this project seeks to reveal how populism shaped the reactions of the powerful, to leverage and consolidate power amid such as crisis. More specifically, in the British context, academics have begun to uncover how populist rhetoric has been deployed through the mobilisation of narratives of national identity, 'Britishness', and blame (Whitham, 2021; Andrews, 2021).

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This dissertation uses a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how the British Government deployed populist rhetoric via Covid-19 press conferences. The paper begins with a theoretical chapter that discusses features of public health and crisis communication, a summary of what is already understood about the construction of pandemic narratives, and an overview of the central themes: populism, and a form of political marketing understood as 'packaging' politics. This is followed by a conceptual framework and a statement of research aims which generated two research questions. A chapter on methodology explains and justifies the CDA, outlines the sampling strategy and offers some limitations to the project. The analytical findings chapter embeds the results of the CDA within broader theoretical concepts, offering an analysis of the ways in which populist rhetoric shaped Government Covid-19 communication. The conclusion summarises these findings and their implications, illustrating the contribution of this project to the current literature and identifies areas for further research.

Overall, this project aims to contribute to a gap in existing literature through a close analysis of the manifestation of populism in Government rhetoric within the context of a global health crisis, the Coronavirus pandemic.

Reflexivity and ethics

Critical discourse analysis offers a 'biased interpretation' because it is 'prejudiced on the basis of some ideological commitment' (Widdowson as cited in Meyer, 2001: 17). Therefore, the findings of a CDA are limited by the positioning and interpretation of the researcher, which must be acknowledged.

As a white, cis, British-born woman, I am aware that I cannot understand how those from different or marginalised backgrounds may imbibe narratives of national identity or 'Britishness'. I recognise that this project is of personal relevance to me, and I have my own political views which may alter my perceptions of Government communication. Further, since I was residing in the UK during the pandemic, I have experienced the press conferences in their original presentations, and despite having not engaged critically with the data before, I am not unacquainted with it and therefore recognise this may provide me with preconceptions. This statement precedes both the methodology and theoretical chapter because not only will an analyst's intrinsic biases affect the interpretation of the data and

consequently the findings of the CDA, but I also recognise these biases will impact the ways in which I engage and apply the secondary literature, thus influencing the framing and theoretical conceptualisation of the project as a whole.

Due to these factors, I acknowledge that my engagement with the texts and the secondary literature will be affected. However, in openly acknowledging this positionality, a CDA aims to account for and integrate this implicit bias rather than presenting its findings as neutral (Fairclough, 1996).

Lastly, no ethical concerns relating to this project were highlighted due to the public nature of the data being analysed.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

This research begins with a presentation of relevant literature pertaining to public health and crisis communication, specifically in relation to the Covid-19 global health pandemic. Secondly, the chapter offers a review of emerging literature surrounding the Covid-19 health crisis which reveals that the dissemination of pandemic communication was an ideologically informed process and expressed features associated with political communication literature. Subsequently, the central tenets of populism are explored, focusing particularly on stylistic aspects and the mobilisation of national identity, as well as the concept of political marketing with an overview of the techniques used to 'package' politics. Finally, this chapter provides a theoretical framework for the project and outlines research objectives.

Public health and crisis communication

Public health communication is a well-developed area of academia and there are many different approaches to public health and crisis communication. The Covid-19 pandemic was framed as a global health crisis and the literature on public health communication illustrates that in these kinds of contexts, one expects to find communication that focuses on the role of culture and emotional appeals to reshape societal behavioural norms and generate appropriate public participation. Scholars have discussed the importance of a culture-centred approach which theorises health communication as a two-way communicative process that

seeks opportunities for change through participation (Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Dutta and Basu, 2011; Wood, Hall and Hasian, 2008). Culture is acknowledged as the characteristics of a community and the focus is on working with these characteristics to generate effective health communication. This is relevant to the Covid-19 context in which marginalised groups have been disproportionately affected, highlighting that, despite the pandemic impacting whole populations, different communication strategies are required depending on cultural characteristics.

Health communication is also closely linked to risk and crisis communication theories which place emphasis on the perceived threat which comprises of both an individual's perception of susceptibility and severity (Roberto, Goodall and Witte, 2008; Dutta-Bergman, 2005). In this way, crisis communication acknowledges that emotions such as fear 'can motivate people to action' but for this to occur, the perceived threat must be significant (Coombs, 2009: 102).

Hence, crisis and health communication must be persuasive and credible for audiences to acknowledge a threat and generate participation. One way in which credibility is constructed is through the presence of questions surrounding blame (Sellnow, 2013; Tansey and Rayner, 2008). A cultural approach to risk communication highlights the creation of shared meaning and trust in constructing risk perceptions and indirectly asks questions about blame and accountability (Tansey and Rayner, 2008: 76). This facilitates discussions of power, and the relationships between established voices of authority who construct social meaning, and the silencing of other voices.

These are central aspects of public health communication theory that can be expected to feature in relation to the Covid-19 health crisis, however, to fully understand Covid-19 communication, scholars have begun to interpret it as politically motivated.

The case of Covid-19

Since the outbreak of the Coronavirus, literature has started to emerge, with scholars keen to understand how governments communicated during the pandemic. The construction of nationalistic frames and 'othering' is a common feature of pandemic discourse but one which is orchestrated through different discursive practices. Academics have analysed the presence of populist discourse throughout various governments' communication, drawing out

recurring narratives such as nationalism, blame, crisis, and morality (Osuna *et al.*, 2021; Whitham, 2021; Agius, 2020). Features present in populist discourse can vary, for example, in the UK, sovereignty and leadership are core components, but for the Spanish political party, VOX, these attributes were absent (Osuna, *et al.* 2021: 7).

In the British context, the emerging pandemic literature locates affective war discourses, which glorify a united 'British nation', characterised by the fundamentally exclusionary notion of a common enemy. Whitham (2021: 79) notes two overarching themes of sovereignty and nationalism, signalled by the presence of militaristic language mobilised through an appeal to 'keep calm and carry on', linking this phenomenon to traditions of discursive processes in which elites seek to 'recontextualise political issues through the war metaphor'. This language sits within a 'tradition of racializing Britishness as whiteness and Englishness' thus excluding an 'other' who is not truly "of the nation" (Whitham, 2021: 80). VOX emphasised antagonism and morality, placing blame through moral hierarchies, illustrating that 'crises are discursively reconstructed by populist discontent and blame narratives' (Osuna *et al.*, 2021: 8).

British pandemic communication can also be explored through the context of the 2016 Brexit referendum and international cooperation (Pevehouse, 2020; Malik, 2020). A *Guardian* correspondent suggests, since leaving the EU, the UK Government have 'an obsession with blocking anything EU-related' and Government's 'populist tendencies' have led to 'blocking experts from doing their jobs' (Malik, 2020). For example, during the 'Vote Leave' Brexit campaign, Michael Gove famously asserted 'people in this country are tired of listening to the experts', polarising society into two groups: Leavers, 'us' and Remainers, 'them'.

Jon Pevehouse (2020: 194) confirms that the pandemic has reinforced the anti-expert and anti-elitist facets of populism, arguing that populism successfully melds anti-elitism with additional beliefs such as nationalism. Pevehouse compellingly argues that defining 'the people' along geographic borders is easy for politicians and therefore, during the pandemic when national borders were closed, nationalistic narratives thrived. These narratives are enhanced by discourses surrounding Brexit, meaning that EU protocol could be ignored, and the Government could act independently.

Government also adopted a political marketing approach which is demonstrated through their use of political 'packaging' techniques. Officials adopted 'buzzwords' and recited pre-rehearsed phrases that resonated with audiences but were often disconnected from their real meaning or concealed actual motives. Jen Birks (2021: 139) argues that the pandemic 'restored the rhetorical prominence of evidence-based policy making' in the aftermath of the Vote Leave EU referendum propaganda. Birks also notes that the UK Government were quick to adopt the phrase 'following the science', suggesting this was a strategic decision which politicians used to avoid blame, presenting choices they made as science based, rather than politically motivated. In a similar vein, in the early stages of the pandemic, minsters decided not to lockdown the country based on a concept they termed 'behavioural fatigue' (Birks, 2021: 140). This was not a scientific term and insufficient evidence was found to inform policy, yet it was repeatedly used in early press conferences as a reason not to introduce lockdown measures.

Finally, the Covid-19 public health campaign followed further trends in political marketing and 'personality politics'. Both Johnson and Hancock appeared on chat-shows such as the *Andrew Marr Show* using it to disseminate wartime narratives and generate Government support (Alnahed, 2021). This demonstrates that politicians continued to 'package' politics, communicating via less formal outlets in which they could perform and present themselves as authentic.

The current literature on the Covid-19 pandemic is in relatively early stages of development, but there are clear trends appearing in analyses addressing the content of Government political messaging. The features articulated in this emerging body of research include themes of nationalism, blame, anti-elitism, performance, and personalisation, which have been associated with explorations of populism and the packaging of politics within political communication literature. To further engage with the presence of these themes in Covid-19 communication this chapter will explore populism and the packaging of politics in greater depth.

Populism

In South American scholarship, populism is a well-established ideological concept and since the 1990's there has been an increasing body of work which draws comparisons between Latin American populism and European populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). Despite the wealth of literature now available, academics struggle to offer clarity in defining populism as an ideological concept because of its ubiquitous nature. Instead, key theorists choose to attribute a variety of features to populism, noting that, as an ideology it generally essentialises notions of 'the people' and 'the elite' (Laclau, 2018; Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Adopting a discursive approach, Laclau (2018) argues that the notion of 'the people' is an empty signifier that can be framed to mean any group of people, thus constructing an identity. He suggests it is this ideological simplicity and emptiness that offers unity and coherence operating within a heterogeneous social terrain. In other words, it is the characteristic vacancy of these 'empty signifiers' that allows for the construction of meaning and identity, depending on the contextual landscape. The notion of 'the elite' articulates a distinctive Othering, positioning the elites as a corrupt enemy (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). The concept of 'othering' is often also used in populist rhetoric to exclude sectors of society, particularly under volatile socio-economic circumstances in which the 'Other' is scapegoated to frame narratives of blame (Rosenthal, 2018).

An ideational approach theorises populism as a second order 'thin-centred ideology', rather than a 'thick-centred ideology', such as fascism or socialism, which explains the apparent universality of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). A thin-centred ideology cohabits with other ideologies and can be projected onto different political agendas, illustrating why populism can be found across the political spectrum. As suggested by Jagers and Walgrave (2007), populism becomes a thick-centred ideology when there is an explicit exclusionary aspect, contrasted against the notion of the people, and an anti-establishment position. Engesser *et al*. (2017) explain that politicians intentionally disseminate populist ideology in a fragmented form, ensuring ambiguity so that the basic ideology resonates with more people. Thus, demonstrating the idea of populism as a thin-centred ideology which is adaptable.

Populism and National Identity

More recently, in *The Revenge of Power*, Moisés Naím (2022) devises a formula to explain the ways in which 'autocrats are reinventing politics', namely the 3P's: populism, polarisation and post-truth. As observed by Naím, populist leaders make bids for power through the use of external threats, militarisation and the glorification of militaristic imagery, criticising experts, and through the portrayal of disintegrating national borders. Furthermore, populist rhetoric is successful when appealing to a critical mass that feels in some respects disillusioned. Status dissonance, as Naím (2022: 91) describes, is the frustration and disappointment that builds when people believe they are falling 'below their natural spot in the pecking order' and their 'economic and social progress is blocked'. Populist leaders therefore often capitalise on these sentiments making emotional appeals to negative affections of fear, anger, and anxieties about the future (Müller, 2016).

In the case of Britain, status dissonance connects to a form of national identity that is irretrievably tied up with imperialism, British exceptionalism, and wartime 'British spirit' (McCann and Ortega-Argilés, 2021; Crozier, 2020). Historically, national identity was articulated in terms of Britain's imperialist mission, and British exceptionalism facilitated the view that British values and institutions should be imposed on colonised nations across the globe (Ashcroft and Bevir, 2021). Despite Britain's global power and status deteriorating post-1945, British exceptionalism remained. Populist discourses surrounding Brexit must therefore be interpreted with an understanding of the internal conflict between British nationalism after the abandonment of the 'Commonwealth dream in favour of a European one' (Ashcroft and Bevir, 2021: 123).

Questions surrounding national identity were essential to pro-Brexit narratives which mobilised British exceptionalism through frames of Euroscepticism and sovereignty, linking these to several highly salient public issues (Gamble, 2021; Bell, 2021). Among them were, a sense of status dissonance or the notion of a 'geography of discontent' in England's northern regions, fears of immigration and globalisation, and through the invocation of the NHS as a proud British institution. This formed part of a broader strategy which appealed to audience's nostalgic affections of British exceptionalism and wartime narratives of One-Nation conservatism.

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One-Nation conservatism is a socio-economic vision which promises national unity and equality associated with state intervention (Gillian, 2021; Newman, 2021). It is reminiscent of a wartime collective mentality symbolised by the infamous 'Blitz spirit'. The post-Brexit 'Levelling Up' agenda embodies the notion of One-Nation conservatism, pledging to generate greater economic prosperity for traditional Labour 'Red Wall' constituencies that have been economically 'left behind'. In this way, the Brexit campaign can be seen to be centred around affective appeals to return to the past, evidenced by the slogan; 'Let's Take *Back* Control'. Brexiteers aimed to capitalise on a sense of 'Britishness' by interlinking populist rhetoric mobilised through nationalism and promising more funding for treasured British institutions such as the NHS. As scholars have begun to understand, these narratives have resurfaced and are key features of Government's Covid-19 populist rhetoric.

Populism as a style and performance

Populism is also understood as a political style, rather than an ideology, which contextualises the concept of populism within a 'contemporary stylised' political landscape which promotes entertainment and performance (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 387). This insight is particularly valuable when considering the stylistic, performative aspect of political communication which encourages the convergence of politics and entertainment. Boris Johnson operates using a populist communication style. When becoming mayor in 2010 Johnson used Twitter to informally respond to monthly 'Ask Boris' questions, subsequently beating his closest competitor in a YouGov poll (2012), 35% to 16%, when voters were asked which mayoral candidate they would most like to go for a drink with. In this way, populist communication styles can successfully present political actors as being 'of the people'. In a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), the stylistic communicative aspects of populism are central tenets of political communication.

Populism is also present in political strategy, with political leaders being crucial to the performance. Populist leaders successfully balance 'extraordinariness and ordinariness' framing themselves simultaneously as being 'of the people' (anti-elite), as well as a 'leader of the people' (Moffitt, 2016: 55). Personalisation and celebritization in contemporary politics have become the norm and populism is no exception (Moffitt, 2016, Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Therefore, when politics becomes a performance, populist leaders become the 'star'.

However, as observed by Moffitt (2016), these performances are not the product of single actors and must be acknowledged as part of a political strategy. To understand this, the process of political marketing must be addressed.

'Packaging' politics

According to Wring (1997), the term political marketing was first coined by political scientist Stanley Kelley in 1956, who described election consultants as 'being able to see things as the average man sees them' (Kelley in Wring, 1997: 651). This captures a key fundamental of political marketing which is the process of communicating policy in a way that is appealing and persuasive to the 'everyday citizen'. Many academics have studied political marketing and there is a longstanding accusation that to shape the political agenda in this way is to 'elevate style over substance' (Scammell, 1999; Franklin, 2004; Lees-Marshment, 2004).

Franklin (2004: 3) explains the phenomenon of 'packaging politics', which refers to politicians' 'determination to set the news agenda' and shape public perceptions of politics. This is a crucial term which exemplifies politicians' preoccupation with shaping public opinion and framing narratives. Franklin first published *Packaging Politics* in 1994 and has since revised his study to focus on the Blair Government. Since its first publication, the concept has been pursued by several academics (see Street, 2001; van Zoonen, 1998, Wheeler, 2013; Stanyer, 2007).

Packaging techniques include, interviews, spin, slogans, soundbites, personalisation, celebritization, and image. The performance and personalisation of politics encourages citizens to develop an emotional affinity to politicians which ultimately increases credibility and legitimacy, which is crucial in a volatile crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This emotional affinity is also described as 'political fandom' which signifies the convergence of politics and entertainment. In a political landscape in which entertainment takes precedence, politicians increasingly place a premium on their public image, seeking to present themselves as authentic, charismatic, and relatable. For example, Cameron was successfully marketed as a 'safe pair of hands' whereas Blair's success was partially due to his ability to represent himself as a 'good bloke' interested in football and popular music (Whitham, 2021; Wheeler, 2013). This personal brand contributes towards an overall sense of authenticity and legitimacy.

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Carefully cultivated political personas manifest themselves publicly through politicians' willingness to engage in popular culture. Street (2001) explores the ways in which politics is constituted through entertainment, with politicians keen to perform on chat shows, whereby politicians make a concerted effort to present themselves as 'normal' and 'just like us' (Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016). For example, Cameron appearing on *The Jonathan Ross Show*, Obama appearing on *Ellen*, or Johnson, accentuating his celebrity persona by presenting the game show *Have I Got News for You*. In an era of personalised politics, 'private lives have become a resource on which politicians draw in constructing an identity', which they use to create the notion of authenticity and credibility (Stanyer, 2007). The implication of these appearances is that politicians adopt a version of 'celebrity status' which helps them to 'articulate the idealised good, honest and true values of the people' (Rojek, 2012: 23).

It is through these performance techniques that politicians develop a personal bond with their followers and citizens engage with politicians in the same way they would with a celebrity or sports team. The convergence of entertainment and politics means that just as political leaders become 'stars', the audience become 'fans', and therefore the entertainment comes not 'just from seeing your team win, but from seeing the other team lose' (Naím, 2022: 45). With this mindset, political opposition become rivals and politics becomes deeply divisive and polarised. Such engagement with popular culture locates celebrity politics within the fields of both political communication and marketing and branding (Street, 2012). In a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), political parties often adopt a political brand, to encapsulate an ideological stance and the political product they are offering (Scammell, 2015). This brand comprises of a 'trinity of elements, the party, the leader and the policy' (Pich, 2020: 191).

Due to highly saturated news and media markets, Davis (2019) reveals that by the 1990's politicians were given just over ten seconds to make a case, producing the well-known soundbite, which provides the public with fragments of information and empty phrases. As argued by Street (2001: 201), 'the soundbite is just another version of the slogan' which is 'tailored to its medium' illustrating the importance of the channel and the process, rather than just the content of the message. The 2016 'Vote Leave' campaign owes much of its success to its populist slogan, 'Let's Take Back Control' which is intentionally ambiguous in that it acts as 'an expansive container for disparate policies and priorities' (Newman, 2021). In other

words, slogans can act as a blank canvas in which voters project their own wish list of policies, thus creating a wide support base without having to address tensions between them.

The packaging of politics has been both commended and criticised. Its advocates claim that the intertwining of politics with entertainment lowers barriers to access and engages citizens according to the cultural zeitgeist of the time (van Zoonen, 2005). However, critics argue that the packaging of politics oversimplifies and trivialises political communication, placing a premium on personality which enhances the performance of politics (Franklin, 2004; Street, 2001).

Theoretical framework

Given the recency of the pandemic, literature is still developing, and an in-depth examination of the content and packaging process of Covid-19 communication remains unexplored. Furthermore, there is relatively little scholarship that approaches the role of populism in British politics with an acknowledgement of the impact that the process and communication mechanism have on the message that is being conveyed. It is generally acknowledged that radical political ideas, such as populism, often come to the fore in times of socio-economic crisis. However, an understanding of how populist discourses materialise within certain crises, particularly the pandemic, is somewhat of an academic lacuna. With this in mind, the main objective of this dissertation is to better understand how populist rhetoric shaped British Government public health communication, in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.

Assuming that government communication has the capacity to shape discourses and public perceptions of politics; Covid-19 communication should be analysed not only through frames of public health crisis, but as a discursive tool which is capable of promoting certain discourses with underlying ideological objectives. In a political landscape in which populism and nationalism are growing and the marketisation of politics is the norm, crises, such as the Coronavirus pandemic, become powerful tools for those in positions of power. How this tool has been operated to reinforce Government agendas is not yet fully understood. This research aims to bring together theoretical concepts surrounding populism and the packaging of politics in the case of Covid-19 messaging.

Having reviewed the expected features of public health communication in a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, it is clear that the role of emotion, and notions of blame and credibility

are important (Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Dutta and Basu, 2011; Sellnow, 2013). Likewise, populist discourses are affective, appealing to constructed meanings of national identity, notions of the 'other', and feelings of anxiety relating to volatile socio-economic conditions in which populism thrives. In this way, populism can be seen to appeal to a certain cultural moment amidst high levels of anxiety and fear surrounding a public health crisis, against a backdrop of a seminal referendum. This is not to essentialise populism, but to understand that populist approaches to political communication have undoubtedly increased and are circulating more widely. This emphasises that the pandemic has been recognised by Government as a particular cultural moment, in which the role of emotion and health messaging can be utilised to promote certain discourses.

Effective public health campaigns also require engaging and persuasive communication. Furthermore, to persuade and influence, a fundamental basis of credibility must be established. Politicians, acting as brand representatives are 'confronted by an unenviable paradox: how to appear above us so we trust them to govern, while also appearing like us' (Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016: 581). Populist politicians strike this balance, using populism as a communication style which enables them to market themselves through performance. Thus, transforming political communication into 'show-business' (Street, 2003). When politicians successfully differentiate themselves from the elite and become 'one of us', they create a brand of authenticity which warrants public trust, and in some cases, political fandom. In legitimising themselves through populist 'personality politics' politicians can also legitimise their agenda.

Emergent literature recognises that pandemic communication should be understood as an ideologically oriented project, but this is underdeveloped area of research. Scholarship does not yet fully understand how, in a British context, populist rhetoric was packaged and deployed via main pandemic communication channels. So far, research has recognised the promotion of populist rhetoric through discourses of nationalism (Whitham, 2021) and blame (Andrews, 2021), but the processes in which these discourses are constructed to shape overarching narratives has not been discussed. This research aims to broach this gap and explore the duality between content and process that underpins the promotion of populist discourse, focusing on how public health communication is packaged, as well as how it is

framed and shaped by populist rhetoric. This enquiry has generated the following research questions:

RQ1: How did populist rhetoric shape British Government public health communication in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How was British Government public health communication 'packaged' to frame narratives and further ideological perceptions in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic?

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter offers an explanation and justification for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the methodology selected for this project, and presents the research tools and analytical framework used to investigate the research questions. The chapter then details the sampling strategy, before finally outlining the limitations of CDA in relation to this research project.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Approaches to CDA regard 'language as social practice', meaning it is socially constructed whilst simultaneously producing social structures and relations (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Critical Discourse analysts reject the idea that language can be neutral in describing the world and instead focus on the way language is used, concentrating not only on what is said, but what is not said (Gill, 1996; Billig, 1991). In this way, CDA is fundamentally concerned with relationships of domination and power, revealing how this is constituted and legitimised through discourse (Wodak, 2001). Discourse constructs social and power relations because 'linguistic resources are intrinsically bound up with the distribution of power' (Breeze, 2011: 515) meaning that an analysis of discourse is an exploration into the processes that shape and govern the production of speech and texts. An advantageous difference between CDA and other post-structural discourse theory is that it recognises that discourse is both constitutive and constituted. In other words, discourse simultaneously shapes and reflects social structures, therefore it is central to the way we understand and behave in the world (Jørgensen

and Phillips, 2002). Consequently, governmental discourse will shape understanding and behaviours surrounding the pandemic.

The theoretical chapter established the importance of language and communication styles in producing public health communication and shaping populist rhetoric. It also revealed that dominant political elites endeavour to shape narratives and persuade audiences, particularly in times of crisis and uncertainty. Janks (1997: 330) astutely notes that discourse becomes 'naturalised' as certain processes or language become the norm, and it is only when the naturalisations in a text are viewed by audiences as unnatural that we understand texts as constructions of reality. As such, discourse constructs a version of reality that is hegemonic, thus the naturalisation of language in Covid-19 press conferences favour the dominant interests of Government (van Dijk, 1993).

Conducting a CDA will allow for an understanding of how pandemic communication both reflects and constructs populist discourse. The discursive packaging of Government communication through press conference speeches was a fundamental feature of public health communication and central to engaging with audiences and generating a response. A CDA will therefore offer the tools to denaturalise Government rhetoric surrounding the Covid-19 public health crisis and enable a deep understanding of how the narrative evolved through Government rhetoric, seeking to critically understand how discourse promoted certain ideologies and power structures.

Scholars also note that CDA elucidates the ways in which language functions to construct discourses of national unity or cultural superiority through the projection of certain social values or concepts, revealing how these ideas relate to structures of power and reproduce social life (Machin and Mayr, 2012; Fairclough, 2000). It is through language that conceptions of 'British identity' or nationalism become naturalised and are drawn on by institutions such as governments, because they appear to be 'common sense' (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 25). Therefore, a CDA approach is crucial to answering the stated research questions because of its focus on denaturalising language within a text, revealing an understanding of how governmental discourse constructs and is constructed by social life.

Intertextuality is the notion that 'all communicative events draw on earlier events' and therefore when analysing texts, one must be aware of the influences and contexts in which they are produced and draw upon (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 73). Interdiscursivity is a particular form of intertextuality which seeks to highlight connections between discourses within a text and how they are articulated to create meaning. CDA's combined focus on language, process and context will be particularly useful in making connections between the rhetoric used in Government communication and how narratives are produced and reflected. Fairclough's (1989) approach to discourse analysis explores the linguistic tools within texts, identifying the interdiscursive aspects of the texts and how they intertextually draw on other texts, therefore crucially embedding them within wider contexts. This is a useful framework to adopt when operationalising a CDA.

Research tools and Analytical framework

Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model for analysis will be utilised for this project because of its emphasis on the relationship between language, discourse, and material change. The three dimensions Fairclough uses to operationalise a CDA are namely textual, discursive, and societal.

Textual

The textual level seeks to explore the object of analysis, the text. It offers a descriptive analysis of the text, focusing on the semiotic elements that are combined to form a socially recognisable text belonging to a certain platform (Jones *et al.*, 2015). Specifically, this dimension will explore the utilisation of linguistic tools to enliven ministerial rhetoric such as metaphors, personification, and active voice, as well as sentence construction, for instance, verb modality, repetition, and vocabulary choice (Fairclough, 1989).

Discursive

The discursive dimension of analysis is the interpretive level which identifies the discourses constructed and reflected within the text and the interaction between these discourses, understanding how they are consumed and engaged with, depending on the audience and

context. Specifically, this dimension will explore the articulation of discourses that synthesise populist Government rhetoric.

Societal

The societal dimension is concerned with the broader socio-historical conditions that influence relationships of power between individuals and groups and govern these processes (Meyer, 2001). This dimension is known as the 'explanatory' level which seeks to explore which social practices are confirmed or challenged. This study will focus particularly on the wider context of the Covid-19 health crisis, Britain's imperialist past, the 2016 EU referendum and British politics more generally.

This three-level framework is particularly valuable because it provides multiple points of analytical entry, and it is the interconnections between these levels which reveal patterns that can be interpreted and explained (Breeze, 2011).

Sampling

Given that Government press conferences were the main vehicle for public health crisis communication during the pandemic in Britain, consequently, these have been selected for an in-depth qualitative analysis of Government pandemic discourse. The format of the press conferences is broadly, a speech given by a cabinet minister chairing the conference, followed by a speech given by a medical professional which then leads into a brief Q&A with various journalists and members of the public. There are approximately 138 transcripts of Covid-19 ministerial press conference speeches available on the GOV.UK website with the corresponding YouTube video, uploaded by the official 10 Downing Street channel attached via hyperlink. In the instance that speeches were not accessible on the GOV.UK website they were transcribed directly from YouTube. The research question is concerned with Government rhetoric and the ways in which discourse is packaged and communicated to audiences. It is not focused on Government interaction with the media or citizens and therefore this investigation is not concerned with the Q&A sessions.

A purposive sampling technique has been employed to narrow the population of texts under analysis. Critical issues that arose during the pandemic were, the economy, travel, security and foreign affairs, and health. This investigation therefore focuses on press conferences chaired by Government ministers with connections to these key areas, namely the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Transport Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, the Health and Social Care Secretary and the Prime Minister (PM). During the timeframe of this study, ministers holding these positions were respectively; Rishi Sunak, Grant Shapps, Dominic Raab, Matt Hancock and Boris Johnson. In total, 20 press conferences including the respective speeches made by the professional medical community at each conference are analysed. Two speeches made by the Chancellor discussing the budget have also been included in the sample because of their pertinence to the evolving pandemic narrative. Due to the ongoing nature of the pandemic, significant turning points within the pandemic have been identified, such as the announcing of new measures or initiatives. The press conferences given at these points have been selected to yield meaningful results in which important announcements were made.

A significant proportion of the key announcements were made by the PM and therefore press conferences chaired by Johnson amount to half of the sample. Finally, despite the pandemic continuing beyond this date, the sample includes press conferences up to 19th July 2021. This is because beyond this point, in the UK, all restrictions were lifted, and the pandemic was no longer contextualised as a crisis by Government. This is visibly reflected in Government communication, as the press conferences devolve into less formal PM statements and are therefore not included in the sample. If undertaking a project with fewer word and time constraints, this transition would be an interesting line of enquiry.

Limitations

There are notable limitations to CDA, arguably the most prominent being that it is a subjective analytical methodology, thus the conclusions drawn are open to interpretation and impacted by the analysts' own positioning. To mitigate this, the analyst must be reflexive and recognise their own intrinsic bias. As aforementioned in the introduction, this project is of personal relevance to me as an analyst and therefore may carry implicit bias. Beginning with the textual

dimension during analysis will help to offset this, ensuring any assumptions surrounding the discourses that are presented in texts are as limited as possible (Janks, 1997).

CDA is not appropriate for drawing broad generalisations or applying the findings to larger datasets. Gill (1996: 55) states this criticism is misplaced because CDA as a methodology is designed for 'specific interpretive contexts' and its strength lies in understanding the importance of certain power relations and social structures. Furthermore, CDA cannot reveal the true intent or agency of those involved in the study nor can it make assumptions about how the texts were consumed (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

Another common critique of CDA argues it operates in a 'heterogeneous' and 'top-down manner' presupposing a particular theory (Breeze, 2011: 499-513). The analytical framework selected helps to counteract this criticism as it encourages the analyst to firstly engage in an in-depth textual exploration which allows the analyst to determine the discourses that are echoed within the specific context.

An additional limitation of this project is that government communication is not the sole producer of discourse surrounding the pandemic, and narratives positioned by the Government may be confirmed or challenged by its audience who are not passive receivers and have the agency to resist such influences (Richardson, 2007). Surveys or interviews would be an appropriate method in determining how texts were consumed and engaged with in social life.

There are some other alternative methodologies that would perhaps be appropriate for this study, for example, a multi-modal analysis would be fruitful because of its consideration of other elements such as tone, gestures and other visual cues. However, a CDA has been chosen because of the opportunities it affords surrounding an in-depth analysis of Government narratives as they evolve and the emphasis it places on interpreting the contexts in which texts are produced and consumed (Jones *et al.*, 2015).

ANALYTICAL FINDINGS

This chapter reviews the analytical findings of the CDA across textual, discursive, and societal dimensions. Given that the RQs seek to reveal the ways in which populist rhetoric is promoted and packaged through Government Covid-19 public health communication, the analysis is organised under three theoretical areas: public health communication, populist rhetoric and packaged politics. The coding scheme for the CDA analysis can be found in Appendix 2.

Public Health and Crisis Communication

As broached in the theoretical chapter, pandemic public health communication was an ideologically driven project used to shape and construct narratives whilst simultaneously generating appropriate public responses. Crisis and public health communication scholarship highlight that generating high perceived threat levels, questions of blame as well as encouraging participation, are all crucial features of a public health campaign (Coombs, 2009; Tansey and Rayner, 2008).

Perceived threat

Throughout the sample Government ministers express high threat levels to generate an appropriate response. Textually, this is visible through the repetition of 'you must' when delivering instructions to the public, for example, 'you must stay at home' [Sample A]. Furthermore, throughout the duration of the sample, the Coronavirus is referred to as a 'deadly and infectious' 'threat', with ministers urging the public to act accordingly, warning that 'many lives will sadly be lost'. Thus, invoking fear and producing high perceived threat levels. Emphasis on the severity of the crisis heightens the audience's perception of threat and susceptibility, increasing fear amongst individuals and motivating a significant response (Coombs, 2009; Dutta- Bergman, 2005).

Perceptions of threat are also increased by affective discourses which humanise communication between the audience and the official delivering the press conference. Yvonne Doyle, a senior director within the NHS, aimed to connect with the public, acknowledging the increasing number of deaths as a 'tragic event, which really touches all of us' [Sample F]. This language unites the public and creates a shared sense of collective suffering, which is magnified further by the PM's lamentation, 'we mourn every person we have lost, and we

grieve with their families' [Sample K]. This emotive language ensures the public remain in a 'primed cognitive emotional state', making them more likely to retain high perceptions of threat and act accordingly, even over sustained periods of time in which fear and susceptibility may have subsided (Aldoory and Austin, 2011: 139). The role of emotion in public health communication can also be explored through the lens of questions surrounding blame and morality, both common themes of populist rhetoric.

Blame

As argued by Tansey and Rayner (2009), risk communication becomes politicised because it asks indirect questions surrounding accountability and defends certain individuals and behaviours whilst rejecting others. These questions are, on occasion, indirectly posed by ministers seeking to instil guilt, warning individuals that if they are not tested for the virus regularly, they are 'risking lives' [Sample K]. Ministers seek to emphasise morality because it focuses questions of blame on individuals rather than Government. Critical theorists argue that health campaigns allow those with power to 'select and frame social conditions and groups as problematic', thereby delegitimising certain approaches and actions (Wilkins and Mody, 2001: 393). In this case, Government ministers legitimise their agenda of 'test and trace' and place questions of blame on individuals who do not participate.

Participation

Participation is a crucial feature in the deployment of any public health campaign. Participation is encouraged through ideals of collectivism, collaboration, and community involvement. Ministers offer praise and gratitude towards those who have 'come out of retirement and put aside their normal duties', presenting this is an aspirational feat, whilst also emphasising the need for collaboration, asking that, 'every individual, every household and every firm' participate [Sample B, H]. This is a culture-centred approach to public health communication which modifies its messaging to the cultural characteristics of a society which will encourage participation and generate a response, through selected cultural variables such as, collectivism (Dutta-Bergman, 2007). Through this culture-centred approach, participation in the British context, can be encouraged through establishing narratives which appeal to certain cultural characteristics or values, such as national identity.

This demonstrates that the Government adopted a culture-centred approach but one which considered all citizens to belong to a certain 'British culture' rather than adjusting its strategy to different communities.

National identity is drawn upon using war narratives, nationalism and British exceptionalism, themes which are features of populist discourse. Prevalent aims of public health communication, such as public engagement and participation, are attained through the mobilisation of populist rhetoric. Thus, revealing the intersections of this communication project which enables political populist discourse to be framed through public health communication.

Populist rhetoric

National identity and war narratives

Throughout the sample, ministers mobilise national identity, particularly 'Britishness', through the dissemination of war narratives. In this way, ministers successfully recontextualise the Covid-19 crisis through the 'war metaphor', drawing on patriotic emotions and the notion of sacrifice (Whitham, 2021). References are made to the 'grit and determination' required 'to reach a shared goal' whilst Dominic Raab encourages 'a national team effort' [Sample C, D]. Likewise, 'personal sacrifice' is a recurring theme throughout the sample, connoting a collaborative war mentality in which individuals make sacrifices for the "greater good" of the nation. This narrative rewrites the public health crisis as a "battle of wills", naturalising actions of social solidarity and collaboration. For example, Health and Social Care Secretary, Matt Hancock proclaimed:

> It is all of our responsibility to keep ourselves safe, to keep our families, our friends and our communities safe…I know it weighs heavily – we've been carrying it for a long time now. But the light of dawn is on the horizon. It's the moment to stand firm until the morning. [Sample M]

Here, Hancock's linguistic choices are analogous to wartime rhetoric which projects the narrative that national fortitude and personal resolve will assist the conclusion of the pandemic. The war metaphor is further strengthened by the militarisation of pandemic communication. Throughout the sample, a clear pattern emerges as militaristic terms such as

'battle', 'defeat' and 'mission' are repeatedly employed. Furthermore, Johnson asserts, the 'single greatest weapon we can bring to this fight is common sense' [Sample K]. Again, this insinuates that the perceived cultural characteristic, of 'common sense' offers Britain an advantage in the recontextualised 'battle' against Coronavirus. Moreover, the Coronavirus itself is personified as a 'vicious', 'invisible enemy' which 'humanity has been tormented by' [Sample N]. Whitham (2021) contends that such anthropomorphic metaphors further escalate the 'war metaphor', contributing towards ideological manoeuvres which draw direct comparisons between Johnson and Churchill, offering Johnson undivided devotion as a populist leader, guiding the country through this war-like crisis.

The press conferences are further militarised, for example almost every ministerial statement begins with a list of daily positive cases and hospitalisations, followed by the total death toll. This list becomes embedded as a social practice throughout the cycle of press conferences and can be likened to the radio broadcasts made during WWII, announcing daily casualties. The mobilisation of war motifs in this way normalises mass death and disregards it as inevitable collateral damage of the pandemic. This absolves Government from blame and overlooks the disproportionate number of deaths in minority communities and those that are 'vulnerable' (ONS, 2020). These individuals, are excluded and viewed as an unfortunate sacrifice, reinforcing racialised discourses of the white English nation (Whitham, 2021).

National identity and British exceptionalism

Populist discourses of national identity are applied through Government's presentation of the NHS. Ministers recognised that the NHS is ingrained within British national identity utilising this through the introduction of the #clapforcarers initiative, a performative gesture in which the nation would step outside their homes and 'come together to applaud the NHS' [Sample D]. Furthermore, NHS staff were furtively branded as selfless 'heroes' and the NHS' 72nd birthday was celebrated in July 2020. These sentiments mirror Burki's (2018) argument that the NHS is not only an institution but an idea, thus contributing towards the construction of 'Britishness', an identity which is epitomised by the virtues of the NHS and its staff. This narrative encourages greater participation and connect to ideas of nationalism. A nationalist spirit is roused in nation addresses from the PM:

> Now is the time for us all to summon the discipline, and the resolve, and the spirit of togetherness that will carry us through. [Sample K]

> The British public have proved again and again, not that it was ever in doubt, that they can be trusted to do the right thing and to do it with common sense. [Sample H]

> It is your collective efforts, our collective efforts, that has given us that crucial time and space to vaccinate more than 31 million people. [Sample R]

The public are reminded, through the use of pronouns, such as 'we', 'our' and 'us', that the crisis response demands national unity and collectivism. Furthermore, these pronouns denote an implicit reference to 'the people', building upon Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017) theorisation of populism as a thin-centred ideology, demarcated by the absence of an explicitly stated exclusionary aspect. Rather, this exclusion is implied through references made to the 'British people', consequently rejecting those that do not internalise this identity. British national identity is rooted in imperialist notions of British exceptionalism characterised through the historical contextualising of the pandemic. Ministers hark back to Britain's historical technological achievements, for example Johnson expresses, the creation of the first ever vaccine that was 'pioneered' in Britain in 1796, and Grant Shapps states that, 'Britain invented the railway 200 years ago' and 'launched the first passenger jet airliner' [Sample N, G]. These iterations of nostalgia are discursive tools used to prompt pre-existing beliefs of British exceptionalism that serve as reminders of Britain's former rank as a global hegemonic power. In line with this portrayal, Berry (2019) suggests this kind of nostalgia 'haunts the collective imagination' because it embodies the belief that at 'decisive moments' Britain 'stood alone' (17).

It is through this lens of British national identity, immersed with nostalgia and frames of wartime social solidarity, that the Government's interventionist rhetoric, reminiscent of One-Nation conservatism, can be understood. Chairing a press conference in April 2020, Chancellor, Rishi Sunak stated:

> We've never seen an economic crisis like this one. Times like this demand that we put aside ideology and orthodoxy. Times like this demand that the state turns to its most immediate purpose: the protection and support of its people. [Sample B]

This draws on a problematic theme for the Conservative Government throughout the pandemic, which is the concept of state intervention. As a fiscally conservative, self-proclaimed Thatcherite, Sunak sought to justify policies of state intervention through reengineering the wartime rhetoric of One-Nation conservatism (Peele, 2021). This justification is reinforced through Sunak's declaration: 'this has never been a question of economics, but of values' [Sample J]. The affirmation that this is not the time for 'ideology' but for 'values' reveals that despite interventionist policies not politically aligning with Conservative ideology, the Government sought to demonstrate their commitment to 'the people', thus contributing towards an overall sense of unity.

Populism and Brexit

During the pandemic the British Government exercised their sovereign independence, enabling them to operate without EU restrictions. International comparisons were custom throughout the press conferences, and as the pandemic developed, scientists and ministers expressed that Britain was on an equal footing with countries such as France and Spain [Sample K]. However, at the start of the pandemic, Downing Street expressed their Eurosceptic, anti-expert position, by vetoing the opportunity for the Department of Health to retain access to the EU's early warning system and were reluctant to impose restrictions, later being accused of complacency (Dimitrakopoulos and Lalis, 2020). In an effort to counteract this critique, scientists presented comparative international data with the caveat that it was 'difficult to interpret' [Sample E]. In doing this, Government was able to deflect criticism and uphold its decision, thereby supporting pro-Brexit discourses, which Wellings (2010) and Daddow (2018) attest to being rooted in populist anti-elitism and ideas of sovereignty.

Discourses surrounding Brexit are enmeshed in populist pandemic communication as ministers interlace narratives relating to the 'Levelling Up' agenda, highlighting Government plans to 'transform' the country and 'rebuild a stronger, more prosperous Britain' [Sample G]. This interdiscursive link is understood as an articulation of the Government's pro-Brexit agenda which is mobilised through nationalism and the exploitation of status dissonance (Naím, 2022). Ministers emphasised that new policies would 'redraw the economic map with decent jobs in every corner of the country' [Sample Q]. This language intertextually links to Levelling Up initiatives, specifically the pledges made to communities in England's northern

regions who were promised economic equality. In doing this, the Conservatives aimed to reaffirm trust and support in previously 'Red Wall' constituencies.

As observed by Newman (2021), Levelling Up is an imagining of One-Nation conservatism in a post-Brexit Britain, designed to prevent social fragmentation and establish a populist coalition between the Left and the Right. In this way, the Conservatives have recognised that new political cleavages are emerging and seek to present themselves as the party of the nation, mobilising national identity rather than class identity (Gamble, 2021). This recognition is best observed in Sunak's shrewd avowal that the pandemic is not about ideology, but values [Sample J]. In doing this, he is deploying populist narratives that unite 'new identity groups which have formed around a burning sense of grievance' and status dissonance (Naím, 2022: 93).

The vaccine, exclusion, and soft power

Nationalist narratives increased exponentially following the commencement of the vaccination programme, as ministers characterised the vaccine as the "saviour" of Britain and the ultimate exhibit of British exceptionalism. Textually, this is indicated through mentions of 'the miracle of science' which has shown 'this country [Britain] can be a scientific superpower, leading the world through the coming technological and scientific revolutions' [Sample N, Q]. This conveys that ministerial vaccine dialogue interdiscursively draws upon nationalist rhetoric and serves to promote the dominant interests of Government in portraying their handling of the pandemic as a success. Ministers also utilise the vaccine to deploy exclusionary populist discourses. For example:

> We in this country, have managed to construct fortresses against COVID, but the disease is still prevalent in other parts of the world… And we must keep our fortress, built at such a huge cost to all of us, secure. [Sample S]

The restrictions on British borders to maintain its 'fortress', coupled with the success of the vaccination programme, offered a unique framework to deploy exclusionary nationalist narratives. With borders closed, the 'empty signifier' of 'the people', as denoted by Laclau (2018), becomes easily definable, enabling an 'us' versus 'them' mentality to be established, as other countries are excluded and prohibited from entering the British 'fortress'. This glorifies

the nation as a superpower which once again, 'stands alone'. Naím (2022) states that, the use of an external threat is an 'age-old practice' in populist bids for power. As such, Coronavirus has been utilised as an external threat and a state of national emergency which has demanded unity. The introduction of the vaccine has expanded this external threat, which now alludes to entire populations that are deemed unsuccessful in controlling the pandemic and are therefore rendered a substantial threat to penetrating Britain's erected 'wall of immunity' [Sample T]. This discourse, which regards 'the people' as those inside the fortress, necessitates an 'Other', an ideological weapon in populist armoury, mobilised when framing narratives of blame (Rosenthal, 2018).

The societal dimensions of CDA demonstrate the vaccine as a tool in which to wield soft power, a phenomenon now termed vaccine diplomacy. In the race to develop a vaccine, spheres of influence emerged, as states shared their vaccines in a way which promoted national interest. For example, Britain, was quick to support its 'overseas territories so that Gibraltar has become one of the first places in the world to offer a vaccination to its entire adult population' [Sample R], whilst the European Union 'stumbled badly out of the gate' (Naím, 2022). Firstly, the vocabulary choice of 'overseas territory', connotes an imperialist Britain which further exalts Britain's nationalist self-image. Secondly, the EU's comparative failure in deploying the vaccine reinforces a sense of British exceptionalism and facilitates an understanding that Britain is "better off", as a sovereign state outside of the European Union.

Blame

Temporally, narratives of blame shift from blame avoidance, to directing more accusatory forms of blame through frames of morality and Othering. Amidst criticism, Government sought to escape blame by justifying their actions (or lack thereof) through the presentation of scientific data. Textually, repeated phrases reaffirming confidence in the data and reassurances that the Government is 'respecting the science that will guide us along', sum together to signal an overall justification of Government measures [Sample C, D, E, H, S]. In some cases, it is explicitly expressed; 'we think that these changes are fully justified by the science' further legitimising their decisions, thus avoiding blame [Sample R].

'Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives'

Morwenna Backhouse

The data presented which accompanies the ministerial statements in each press conference seldom stray from the narrative positioned by Government. Health professionals insist that the data they present is 'a consensus view across a number of modelling groups' [Sample L] despite rife criticism of Government handling amongst the health community (SAGE, 2020). This is unsurprising given that discursive reality construction is hegemonic and therefore the dominant interests of Government are favoured (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk, 1993). Platforms are given to health professionals that are willing to contribute to the construction of discourses that align with the interests of those in power, ensuring the data presented justifies Government decisions and releases them from accountability.

However, as the pandemic evolved, ministers actively adjusted the narrative from one of interventionism and collectivism towards individualism and morality. This is observed through an alteration of modal verbs in ministerial rhetoric, as 'you must' is replaced by 'you could' and 'should'. Here, the onus is placed on the individual to "do the right thing" and can be seen as part of a wider process in which the Government seek to turn the Covid-19 crisis into a question of individual virtue, rather than state intervention, thereby shirking responsibility. As noted by Andrews (2021: 220-23) these narratives, which call on 'common sense' and 'stigmatise individual behaviours' were crucial to the Government's 'exit strategy'. This move towards individuality may also carry the purpose of appeasing Conservative MP's who felt Covid-19 policy had deviated too far from Conservative neoliberal ideology.

This narrative is combined with accusatory forms of blame as those 'who flout[ed] social distancing' were 'letting down businesses and workers who have done so much' [Sample I]. This representation of 'rule flouters' poses questions of blame through moral frameworks and ignores structural inequalities which meant that a proportion of those flouting social distancing did so out of necessity. For example, by taking public transport or due to the inability to work from home or benefit from sick pay.

Blame narratives were further escalated by the emergence of Coronavirus variants, which are named after the countries in which they were first identified. Subsequently, the metaphor of Britain's fortress is accompanied by a distinct 'Other', as other countries, deemed responsible for new variants, might be seen to obstruct Britain's recovery plans. This logic builds upon a

populist trope, which presents the Other as an enemy of 'the people' that threatens public security (Wojczewski, 2020).

Populist leadership style

Key ministers employed a populist political style that emphasises the value of leadership. Johnson assumes the traits of Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2013) 'populist strongman', crafting an image of himself as a man of action; 'I will not hesitate to put on the handbrake and reverse these changes, at a local or indeed a national level' [Sample H]. As argued by Mudde and Kaltwasser, these types of populist figures draw upon a sense of crisis which demands strong leadership and bold decisions. This is further exemplified by Hancock and Sunak's assertions:

> I set a goal. I can announce that we have met that goal. So to my team, I want to say… I am so proud of what you have achieved. [Sample C]

> I am speaking to you now, directly, I said whatever it takes, and that means for however long it takes. But I promise you. We will meet this moment with the passion and energy it demands. [Sample Q]

Through the repetition of the personal pronoun 'I', ministers assume an active voice, taking exclusive ownership of decisions, thus positioning themselves as principle architects of the country's crisis management. Hancock and Sunak's ability to adopt muted populist tendencies through such performances whilst maintaining a less overt populist persona than Johnson, supports the theory that populism is a political style rather than a first order ideology, thus allowing us to understand how politicians can fluctuate between the boundaries of populist rhetoric (Moffitt, 2016; Engesser *et al*., 2017). Politicians were also able to establish themselves as leading figures in pandemic policy through the use of personalisation, a feature of packaged politics.

Packaged politics

Personality Politics

Government ministers package populist discourse by drawing upon themes of personality politics to personalise and authenticate their message. Johnson's use of informal idioms as

well as persistent mentions of the pub, contribute towards his self-representation as a charismatic "man of the people". He reveals, like many Britons:

> On Monday the 12th [April 2021] I will be going to the pub myself- and cautiously
> but irreversibly raising a pint of beer to my lips. [Sample R]

Here, Johnson's performance capabilities enable him to participate in a so-called *Stammtisch* (beer table) discourse, which contributes to the construction of a persona that signals he is a "man's man" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). Notably, the pub is a 'proud code of britishness' (Rapport, 2020), and therefore Johnson is tapping into a cultural tradition of British identity that further enhances the perception that he is an every-day politician, 'just like us' and is therefore by default, anti-elite. (Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016).

Other Secretary of States such as Hancock and Sunak, adopt similar methods of personalisation, seeking to create authenticity by relating to their audiences on a personal level. Hancock draws upon his personal experience of the pandemic, whilst Sunak seeks to demonstrate an understanding of public interest.

> I know from personal experience, too, just how much people with symptoms want
> to know if they have got the disease. I know that I did. It helps remove the worry.
> [Sample C]

> I know the British people don't like tax rises. Nor do I. But I also know they dislike
> dishonesty even more. [Sample Q]

Here, as outlined by Fairclough (2000) in *New Labour, New Language?*, by speaking in first person, politicians relate their personal experience and views to that of the public, meaning they are speaking informally on behalf of "ordinary" people. Thus, adding conviction to their attempts to appear "normal". In endorsing themselves as "normal", ministers could instil trust and credibility in the policies they presented, an important feature in public health communication, generating high perceived threat levels.

Personalisation is also approached through the use of affective discourses and a vernacular of conventional expressions such as, 'lives have tragically been lost before their time' [Sample I]. This informality affords politicians likeability, as audiences feel a humanising emotional affinity. This is a useful tool for populist politicians such as Johnson, allowing him to solidify

his political fanbase and shield him from 'the formal, lawful demand for accountability' (Naím, 2022: 31). Once elevated to celebrity status, politicians acquire unconditional support enabling them to avoid accountability or blame.

In a polarised political landscape, in which political fans revel in seeing the opposing side "lose", negative discourses that mobilise emotions of frustration and disappointment are valued (Naím, 2022). However, throughout this sample politicians make emotional appeals to the public that are resoundingly hopeful:

> There is light at the end of the tunnel…we know that hope is on the horizon. [Sample M]

> We will build a fairer and more just country in their memory. Our recovery begins today. [Sample Q]

> We're not at the end of it, but the signs are very hopeful. [Sample S]

This is a revealing finding because it illuminates a contrast between the conventional features of populist rhetoric which mobilise negative emotions to promote exclusion and blame, compared to the role of positive uniting emotions such as hope, within populist frames of crisis communication. It is well theorised that populist rhetoric invokes affective language however in the context of a public health crisis, emotive rhetoric appears to oscillate across the spectrum of both positive and negative.

Packaged politics: buzzwords and slogans

Buzzwords and slogans were a key feature of Government pandemic communication. Central discourses of collectivism and the emphasis on the NHS were encompassed in the Government's main slogan: 'Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives'. However, this devolved into the more ambiguous slogan: 'Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives', capturing the Government's shift in narrative from one of clear social solidarity and national unity to questions of individual responsibility, thereby renouncing blame. These slogans also functioned as soundbites which could be projected via other communication channels such as social media or news broadcasts, concentrating entire press conferences into a single sentence, arguably trivialising complex public health messages. 'Stay alert' and 'control the virus' are

meaningless phrases that do not provide any clear instruction, further emphasising the discourse of individualised responsibility which advocates the use of 'common sense'. Audiences may interpret 'staying alert' in disparate ways allowing Government to circumvent culpability.

As understood in political campaigns, ambiguous slogans are part of a political strategy which offer a blank canvas unto which diffuse aspirations can be projected, as seen with the successful 'Let's Take Back Control', 2016 referendum slogan. In the context of this health campaign, the ambiguity of the slogans was an intentional strategic choice made by Government to evade accountability. Public health messages were packaged into oversimplified forms to protect Government interests at the detriment of the public health campaign, which was arguably undermined, joining Franklin's (2004) argument that when slogans are purposely ambiguous, they are problematic, supplanting the advocacy of functional measures and policy.

The salient utilisation of buzzwords supports the idea that Government sought to distance themselves from decisions, evidenced by consistent remarks they were 'monitoring the data' and 'guided by the science' as well as mentions of the 'roadmap', designed to resolve the Covid-19 crisis. The use of these buzzwords creates the impression that the Government was restricted by the data and decisions were not of their own making. This is further magnified by contrived references to the importance of the 'R-value', a phrase rarely deployed by the health practitioners themselves, except when its significance is fully explained in depth. This demonstrates that complex health messages were distilled into accessible but meaningless buzzwords and amplified by ministers looking to legitimise their agenda.

Moreover, the dismissal of international comparisons as 'difficult to interpret' elucidates the use of empty phrases deployed to preserve the Government's reputation both domestically and internationally. This further enhances the conception that scientific data was used to legitimate policy, rather than initiate it (Birks, 2021). The packaging of Government crisis communication into buzzwords and slogans therefore worked to maintain the appearance of science-backed policy making, validating the Government's actions, while simultaneously ceding responsibility.

Populist rhetoric was deployed through narratives of national identity and British exceptionalism grounded in discourses surrounding Brexit, whilst militaristic language assisted fundamentally exclusionary forms of populism which established an Other and further promoted a nationalist spirit, priming questions of blame. These messages were packaged by ministers utilising a populist communication style and employing features of personalised politics. Health communication was packaged into digestible slogans and buzzwords used to distance Government from policy and evade blame.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the analysis revealed that populist rhetoric shaped Government pandemic communication through the promotion of a British national identity, exclusionary nationalist discourses, and provocative affective appeals, connecting to blame, fear and hope.

The British Government's articulation of national identity was attained through the pervasive use of military metaphors and successfully captured a zeitgeist of British exceptionalism. This reinforced a position of social solidarity and national unity embodied by a fundamental attachment to the NHS. This rhetoric established an 'us' versus 'them' mentality which framed the exclusion of an 'Other'. Populist rhetoric was also discernibly framed through language of affect, posing questions of blame. Likewise, Government interdiscursively linked pro-Brexit narratives to the Covid-19 crisis revealing how nationalism can be mobilised as a powerful exclusionary force.

These narratives were promoted by personalised politicians utilising a populist communication style to engage their audiences. Messages were packaged using buzzwords and slogans to defer accountability both to individuals and 'the science' thus furthering a certain ideological perception of the pandemic which released Government from blame.

Despite discourse analysis being an interpretive methodology, which cannot reveal the true intent of individual actors, this analysis hopes to have demonstrated that through the pattern and consistency of the themes presented, the sample suggests the deployment of populist rhetoric was part of a coherent political strategy, which aimed to legitimise Government actions and stabilise power whilst generating the appropriate public health responses.

Given that much of the literature focused on populism within British politics predates the pandemic and concentrates on Brexit, this project is noteworthy as it shows how populist rhetoric has been reengineered and applied to this context. This paper contributes towards a gap in existing literature by exploring the union between populist rhetoric and packaged politics in the context of a global health crisis.

The intersection between populist rhetoric and public health crisis communication affords a notable implication regarding wider themes in populist scholarship. As understood through this dissertation's analysis, and in line with Müller's (2016) assertion, populist attitudes are activated through negative affections of fear and anxiety, in this case, expressed through exclusionary nationalist sentiments and a glorification of Britain's perceived former world influence. However, in contrast, amidst a global crisis, populist rhetoric made hopeful appeals for a "better future" which Government ministers assured they could realise. The function of positive emotional communication appears counterintuitive to populist discourse usually associated with fear and anger and is not fully understood. The analytical findings presented aim to have offered some insight into the role of populism in crises and further expand on our understanding of populism as a phenomenon which appeals to one's emotions. Therefore, theoretical discussions of emotional appeals in populist rhetoric within this dissertation should be revised to include both positive and negative affective language.

The context of a global crisis reshapes political communication, and whilst in very recent months academics have begun to investigate the adaptions of populist rhetoric to accommodate the Covid-19 crisis (see Widdman, 2022; Maher *et al.*, 2022), this could be further explored. This study is limited by its confinement to the British context and a wider-scaled multimodal analysis would be fruitful in exploring the ways in which populist rhetoric has been promoted and packaged elsewhere, in response to the global Covid-19 crisis. This could contribute to an understanding of how populism is applied both as a performance and a political strategy in democracies that utilised populism as a mechanism for leveraging power in periods of instability and crisis.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Sampled Texts (not full list)

Sample A:

Johnson, Boris. *Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19)* [Speech transcript]. Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, GOV.UK. 23 March 2020. Accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-23-march-2020 11/08/22.

Sample B:

Sunak, Rishi. *Chancellor's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19)* [Speech transcript]. HM Treasury, GOV.UK. 20 April 2020. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-22-april-2020 13/08/22.
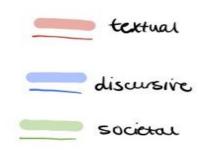
Sample C:

Hancock, Matt. *Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19)* [Speech transcript]. Department for Health and Social Care, GOV.UK. 1 May 2020. Accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/health-and-social-care-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-1-may-2020 13/08/22.

Sample D:

Raab, Dominic. *Foreign Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19)* [Speech transcript]. Foreign & Commonwealth Office, GOV.UK. 7 May 2020. Accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-7-may-2020 13/08/22.

Appendix 2: Coding Scheme

textual

discursive

societal

Appendix 3: Annotated Text

Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19). 23 March 2020

Johnson:

Good Evening,

The coronavirus is the biggest threat this country has faced for decades – and this country is not alone.

All over the world we are seeing the devastating impact of this invisible killer.

And so tonight I want to update you on the latest steps we are taking to fight the disease and what you can do to help.

participation

And I want to begin by reminding you why the UK has been taking the approach that we have.

legitimise actions? first national lockdown

Without a huge national effort to halt the growth of this virus, there will come a moment when no health service in the world could possibly cope; because there won't be enough ventilators, enough intensive care beds, enough doctors and nurses.

And as we have seen elsewhere, in other countries that also have fantastic health care systems, that is the moment of real danger.

emphasis on NHS · international comparison

To put it simply, if too many people become seriously unwell at one time, the NHS will be unable to handle it - meaning more people are likely to die, not just from Coronavirus but from other illnesses as well.

So it's vital to slow the spread of the disease. *buzzwords*

Because that is the way we reduce the number of people needing hospital treatment at any one time, so we can protect the NHS's ability to cope - and save more lives.

And that's why we have been asking people to stay at home during this pandemic.

And though huge numbers are complying - and I thank you all - the time has now come for us all to do more. *faced criticism for not acting sooner*

From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction - you must stay at home.

Because the critical thing we must do is stop the disease spreading between households.

That is why people will only be allowed to leave their home for the following very limited purposes:

- shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible

- one form of exercise a day - for example a run, walk, or cycle - alone or with members of your household;
- any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person; and
- travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home.

That's all - these are the only reasons you should leave your home.

You should not be meeting friends. If your friends ask you to meet, you should say No.

You should not be meeting family members who do not live in your home.

You should not be going shopping except for essentials like food and medicine - and you should do this as little as you can. And use food delivery services where you can.

If you don't follow the rules the police will have the powers to enforce them, including through fines and dispersing gatherings.

To ensure compliance with the Government's instruction to stay at home, we will immediately:

- close all shops selling non-essential goods, including clothing and electronic stores and other premises including libraries, playgrounds and outdoor gyms, and places of worship;
- we will stop all gatherings of more than two people in public — excluding people you live with;
- and we'll stop all social events, including weddings, baptisms and other ceremonies, but excluding funerals.

Parks will remain open for exercise but gatherings will be dispersed.

No Prime Minister wants to enact measures like this. *Hands are tied by science*

I know the damage that this disruption is doing and will do to people's lives, to their businesses and to their jobs.

And that's why we have produced a huge and unprecedented programme of support both for workers and for business. *socio - economic strain*

And I can assure you that we will keep these restrictions under constant review. We will look again in three weeks, and relax them if the evidence shows we are able to.

But at present there are just no easy options. The way ahead is hard, and it is still true that many lives will sadly be lost. *fear → perceived threat*

And yet it is also true that there is a clear way through.

Day by day we are strengthening our amazing NHS with 7500 former clinicians now coming back to the service. *nationalism / British pride*

With the time you buy - by simply staying at home - we are increasing our stocks of equipment. *participation* *Slogan*

We are accelerating our search for treatments. *strong action verbs*

We are pioneering work on a vaccine.

And we are buying millions of testing kits that will enable us to turn the tide on this invisible killer. *personification*

I want to thank everyone who is working flat out to beat the virus. *key worker*

Everyone from the supermarket staff to the transport workers to the carers to the nurses and doctors on the frontline. *militaristic*

But in this fight we can be in no doubt that each and every one of us is directly enlisted. *militaristic* *collectivism*

Each and every one of us is now obliged to join together.

To halt the spread of this disease.

To protect our NHS and to save many many thousands of lives.

And I know that as they have in the past so many times. *War analogies* *Blitz spirit ?*

The people of this country will rise to that challenge.

And we will come through it stronger than ever. *nostalgia* *collectivism*

We will beat the coronavirus and we will beat it together. *National unity*

And therefore, I urge you at this moment of national emergency to stay at home, protect our NHS and save lives. *Slogan*

Thank you.

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