

Policy Brief

Coronavirus Discourses: Linguistic Evidence for Effective Public Health Messaging

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Summary of the research

Understanding the flow and impact of Coronavirus public health messages during the Coronavirus pandemic is of major importance to managing the ongoing public health response.

Messaging surrounding geographic borders and vulnerable populations, including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic populations, were highlighted as key challenges by our public health partners, Public Health England, Public Health Wales and NHS Education for Scotland.

Our study has examined the content and effectiveness of messaging, and analysed responses to a survey on linguistic features of public health messages from 1000 demographically representative UK adults, supplementing findings with a corpus linguistic analysis of government briefing and online comments from the public, feedback from a Public Involvement Panel (PIP), and a synthesis of existing research.

Preliminary Policy Recommendations

Our key recommendation is for providers of public health messaging content to carry out large-scale community-specific engagement to ensure messaging is inclusive, and relevant to a wide range of people. Vulnerable populations are heterogeneous, and the impacts of COVID-19 vary across ethnic groups [1], challenging the appropriateness of addressing BAME populations collectively. The communities affected disproportionately by COVID-19 should be consulted accordingly, at every stage of messaging development from its inception to measuring uptake.

Assessment of the effectiveness of public health messaging must draw on feedback from a sufficiently large cohort to ensure statistically significant findings from full UK demographic representation, and emphasis must be placed on assessing barriers to access and uptake of messaging with the communities most at risk. A dynamic, community-focused response is required to ensure that developing barriers to messaging uptake are identified and addressed in a timely way. Moreover, the response must recognise that decisions on behaviours and compliance often are not made on an individual basis, but rather after seeking information from others in their communities.

Preliminary Key Findings

- The language of Coronavirus briefings and messaging often represents the UK population as a homogenous group. Our qualitative findings reveal issues with public health messaging reaching or otherwise landing with the most at-risk communities (see also [2]). Public comments posted online revealed confusion surrounding mixed and overly complicated messaging, and requirements for tailored, flexible guidance to accommodate individual circumstances.
- References to vulnerable populations are not a salient feature of government briefings, subsequently limiting opportunities for repetition and amplification of key issues in mainstream news

and public discourse. Most online comments about BAME populations were ‘information seeking’ about the disproportionate effects of COVID-19. They also contained diminishment of challenges, denial of higher risks, and comparisons with other susceptible groups (women, the elderly, and those in poor social housing).

- Over time, public comments appeared to:
 - be more critical of measures (both in terms of degree and volume)
 - be more likely to want to change measures and make recommendations
 - make more (inter)national comparisons
 - express more concern over non-compliance
 - be more critical of leadership
- General barriers to comprehension and uptake of guidance include vague language, grammatically complex sentences, jargon, over-emphasis on personal responsibility, and use of war metaphors (which can affect willingness to act in self-limiting ways [3]).

Further information

Coronavirus Discourses project website: <https://c19comms.wp.horizon.ac.uk/>

- [1] Platt, L. & Warwick, R. (2020). Are some ethnic groups more vulnerable to COVID-19 than others? Institute for Fiscal Studies, Nuffield Foundation, 1-26.
- [2] A University of Nottingham survey on the Track and Trace system, highlighted issues of trust and understanding, particularly among BAME respondents. Reference: Dowthwaite, L., Fischer, J., Vallejos, E. P., Portillo, V., Nichele, E., Goulden, M., & McAuley, D. (2021). Public Adoption of and Trust in the NHS COVID-19 Contact Tracing App in the United Kingdom: Quantitative Online Survey Study. *Journal of medical Internet research*, 23(9), e29085.
- [3] Semino, E. (2021). “Not Soldiers but Fire-fighters” – Metaphors and Covid-19. *Health Communication*, 36(1), 50-58).

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