

# EXPLORING THE COVID-19 EVALUATIVE DISCOURSE IN RESEARCH-FOCUSED COMMENTARY BLOGS

## *Appraisal Resources for Engagement Meanings*

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**Abstract** – This study investigates how bloggers discuss the public health emergency amid the global COVID-19 pandemic and use the options made available by evaluative language to realize interpersonal stance-making meanings on public-facing blog platforms. Using a representative corpus of Covid-19 blog posts, I examine the Covid-19 evaluative discourse through the APPRAISAL system and its subcomponent of *engagement* suggested in Martin and White’s (2005) social semiotic framework. Findings show variation in the frequency and function of *engagement* resources, exemplifying how blog writers construe evaluations for their own or other value positions and recognise the presence of their readers in the texts. These findings are contextualized within the wider rhetoric of Covid-19 public discourse effected by the bog genre, which is informed by multidisciplinary views and perspectives on the public health emergency as required for effective public communication in crisis management.

**Keywords:** discourse; genre; appraisal; blogs; Covid.

## 1. Introduction

In a digital age, when Web 2.0 technologies have grown by leaps and bounds for collaborative frameworks, the multifunctional nature and use of blogs as a genre (Herring et al. 2005, 2013; Myers 2010; Garzone et al. 2007; Garzone 2020) has massively instantiated across diverse fields, such as public relations, marketing, science, and politics. This had made it extremely easy for anyone to become an online publisher, personalise content, and build virtual communities of practice worldwide around their blog niches. When built through different types of publishing content, blogging provides a unique way to gauge public opinion on a business, product or brand (Hallett 2005), to serve as a pipeline to political information and opinion (Farrell/Drezner 2008/2021), or provide several different reasons for academics and researchers to blog in wider academic settings (Walker 2006; Myers 2010; Kjellberg 2010; Puschmann 2014), among other goals. In this, blogs have become a major digital publishing phenomenon as well as a

significant element of contemporary mass media culture (Elega/Özad 2018), affording the rapid expansion of new “prosumption” (Ritzer 2014) activities (a combination of production and consumption), on account of their interaction with digital technologies. At the same time, blogs have facilitated and intensified “digital practices”, as defined by “‘assemblages’ of actions involving tools associated with digital technologies, which have come to be recognised by specific groups of people as ways of attaining particular social goals, enacting particular social identities, and reproducing particular sets of social relationships” (Jones et al. 2017: 3). Just as the effectiveness of using blogs emphasizes ‘what is shared’ by an audience and makes it possible to understand new kinds of (technology-driven) social practices, so too it implies diverse communicative activities and different degrees of public engagement for the creation of new, collective knowledge. As a social medium for public engagement and indeed new social practices, blogs lean heavily on the two key dimensions of “social presence/media richness” for virtual communities and “self-presentation / self-disclosure” for content communities (Kaplan/Haenlein 2010).

Standing alongside the view of blogging as a wider programme of knowledge dissemination, collaboration and public engagement associated with digital practices is evidence for the existence of evaluative and interpersonal features of language in blogs (Myers 2010; Bondi/Diani 2015; Tessuto 2015; Bondi 2018; Zou/Hyland 2019, 2020; Tessuto 2020, 2021a/b; Curry/Pérez-Paredes 2021). As with any written text which embodies interactions between writers and readers, these evaluative features are significant for the ways bloggers frame ideas, beliefs, and attitudes—through a set of interpersonal options to engage their readers, and contribute with an ideology or value system that is influenced by personal opinions, roles, and identities in rhetorically persuasive patterns of interactions between writers and readers. By the same token, the expression of evaluation and the role of interaction in blogs draw together a number of research paradigms that have been dealt with elsewhere via academic discourse analysis, including *evaluative orientations* (Lemke 1998), *evaluation* (Hunston/Thompson 2000; Bednarek 2006), *stance* (Conrad/Biber 2000; Hyland 2005a; Biber 2006; Hyland 2009), *metadiscourse* (Hyland/Tse 2004; Hyland 2005b), *appraisal* (Martin/White 2005), and the genre-focused argument function of evaluation (Paltridge 1997; Swales 2004). All of these influential lines of research into academic writing in some way address the idea of ‘positioning’ as being not just about taking sides (making evaluations) in relation to the propositions and issues discussed in the text, but also about connecting people and ideas (doing interaction).

As many institutional websites churn out blogs for academic or non-academic practitioners to establish their own niches around an evaluative

system of linguistic expressions, blogging about the Covid-19 pandemic creates an opportunity for understanding how bloggers wish to position themselves and other people in relation to the specific topics they write about, that is, how they make evaluations about their own or other propositions and construct the role of persuasive interaction in text. But having this niche topic to ‘hook’ blogs on to can also inform our understanding of the coronavirus pandemic as a “crisis discourse” that threatens life (Gjerde 2021: 7), in much the same way as the concept of ‘crisis’ has an immense lay, media and academic currency, involving for instance sociologically-oriented discourse analysis of crises (Jessop 2013). Not only this, but discourses of Covid-19 have also elicited a global policy response to this crisis, perceived as a threat to “important expectancies of stakeholders” (Coombs 2010: 99), and in this way they have implicated an array of risk management measures operationalised through a range of micro/macro-level discourse and communication strategies articulated in (social) media texts and genres. By representing a far-reaching humanitarian crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic has thus exposed an important, multidisciplinary debate across several different fields, including epidemiology, political science, economics, sociology, and law, with a view to providing comprehensive insights into a rapidly changing situation arising from this global public health crisis, and ultimately inform society and produce new knowledge.

Focusing on this important debate serves as a benchmark to understand how bloggers think over the discursive processes of the coronavirus outbreak, and use an evaluative/interpersonal system of linguistic expressions made available by Covid-19 blogs. For the purposes of this study, blogs are treated as rhetorical and semiotic models of text, discourse, and genre with socially-inferred conventions, goals, and practices. Hence, the objectives of this paper, which is guided by two interrelated research questions:

1. What are the evaluative, linguistic resources by which blog writers convey their own or other position toward the content and reader, and ultimately construct a text that is regarded as effectively persuasive for writer-reader dialogue in the public-facing genre?
2. What differences are there in the use of such resources for explicitly positioning a text’s proposition interpersonally in blogs?

Prior to answering these questions, I will first outline the empirical material and research method employed, and thereafter undertake the analysis and discussion of the findings for these questions in order to draw some conclusions.

## 2. Material and Method

### 2.1. *Corpus data*

The empirical data source for this study came from a synchronically randomized corpus of 80 blog posts on the Covid-19 topic sanctioned by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) institutional website and labelled as ‘LSE Covid-19 Blog – From research to global policy response’. They were collected over a one-year period - from July 2020 to July 2021.

Sampled posts were retrieved and downloaded from this database and subsequently converted into text format, leaving out structure-wise features (‘permalinks’, ‘trackbacks’) and follower comments running down these posts. Using WordSmith retrieval system (Scott 2015), the overall data source for this study was a 93,241 word corpus of representative postings published by the institution.

### 2.2. *Understanding the nature of LSE Covid-19 blog posts*

The scope of Covid-19 blogs over the LSE’s website is essentially multidisciplinary, bringing together the health and social care, financial, political, legal, governmental and other consequences of the outbreak across the world. This means that health issues are inherently complicated under the Covid-19 crisis, so situating different kinds of discourses from multiple disciplines within these blogs exemplifies a commitment to communicating significant challenges and risks posed by the pandemic across nearly every industry worldwide, and to similarly emphasise an immediate global policy response to this crisis. In other words, blogging about Covid-19 implicates an array of critical insights and perspectives from different disciplines to better understand the public health crisis, and ultimately lay a foundation for policymaking in the government and health sectors.

Sampled posts were written by internationally-dispersed single or joint authors in their roles of academics, who stated their positions and expertise over the LSE’s blogging platform. Full attribution can be seen by the blog posts carrying the author’s name as well as a small colour photo headshot at the bottom of the posts and spicing up the text with the writer’s position and research interests. These presentation features helped bloggers gain control of their own academic or professional public identity over the website.

Alongside this online identity presentation, sampled posts relied on “commentaries” to present arguments and opinions (Iedema et al. 1994) and were published through a “peer-reviewed thematic collection” (personal communication with this author). In this way, and as clarified by the vision statement of the LSE institution over its website, blog posts took the form of

expert and research-focused commentary of multidisciplinary issues borne out by the coronavirus pandemic and its implications upon which bloggers argued from their own perspectives.

In conjunction with the research and commentary format generated by the bulk of the blogging content was a more natural language style of the posts. Essentially, bloggers avoid overusing specific lexis that may not be well known outside disciplinary circles, so that using an easy-to-read and transparent style to its full potential was a convenient strategy to write posts with a relatively wide audience in mind, including policymakers and other non-academics. Just as bloggers made only modest use of hyperlinks to direct readers to more detailed reports or other pieces of research, news items or other blog posts, so too they moderately injected tables or charts into the text to quickly assist in the reader's interpretation of blog topics.

Consistent with a wider programme of dissemination and knowledge of topical issues over the existing website, writing posts suggests just how bloggers seek to set up an online information and communication platform for the broadest possible audiences to become aware of a breadth of research analysis and commentary of the Covid-19 landscape in a loose but still intellectual tone. As an indispensable tool for publishing accessible academic commentary and research, therefore, the blog genre contributes to enhancing online public debate and understanding about this outbreak in the public sphere.

### **2.3. Data analysis procedure**

For the analysis of the linguistic features of blog posts, reference was made to the typology of APPRAISAL suggested in Martin and White's (2005) comprehensive framework of evaluative language. Developed as part of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Martin/White 2005), the generality of the APPRAISAL framework attends to the "subjective presence of writers/speakers in texts as they adopt stances towards both the material they present and those with whom they communicate", and extends to the ways in which writers/speakers forge "particular authorial identities or personae", and how they "align or disalign themselves with actual or potential respondents", and with "an intended or ideal audience" (Martin/White 2005: 1). As such, this framework, consists of the "major discourse semantic resources construing interpersonal meaning (alongside involvement and negotiation)" (Martin/White 2005: 34-35) realized across the three interacting subsystems of ATTITUDE, ENGAGEMENT, and GRADUATION (Martin/White 2005: 34-40).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> These categories draw upon the Systemic Functional elaboration of interpersonal meaning resources, such as mood, modality and attitudinal lexis (e.g. Halliday/Matthiessen 2004) as well

For the purposes of this study, however, only the subsystem of ENGAGEMENT was chosen from this theoretical framework, with a view to examining the ways “writers adopt a stance towards the value positions being referenced by the text and with respect to those they address” (Martin/White 2005: 92). ENGAGEMENT, as claimed by the authors, is related to “those meanings which in various ways construe for the text a heteroglossic backdrop of prior utterances, alternative viewpoints and anticipated responses” (Martin/White 2005: 97)<sup>2</sup>. The point of departure for this system is the distinction between the monoglossic utterance or undialogized bare assertion (one which does not allow for any viewpoints other than the author’s) and the heteroglossic or dialogistic one, which allows for other utterances or alternative positions and their relationships to be represented (Martin/White 2005: 98-102).

In line with this, the analysis of ENGAGEMENT relied on lexically and grammatically different items that “contract” or “expand” dialogue in heteroglossic text (Martin/White 2005: 97-135), and provide a classification of the particular type of dialogistic positioning associated with rhetorical effects and meanings in this kind of text. More precisely, dialogic expansion allows for “alternative positions and voices” (Martin/White 2005: 102) and extends over the “entertain” and “attribute” instances of the propositions made, with the dialogic grammar of “attribute” also attending to instances of “acknowledge” and “distance” on the part of the writer (Martin/White 2005: 98, 102-104). Dialogic contraction “acts to challenge, fend off or restrict the scope of such” (Martin/White 2005: 102) through propositions that either “disclaim” or “proclaim”. Propositions of the “disclaim” type cover constructions of “deny” and “counter”, while those of the “proclaim” type cover constructions of “concur”, either in terms of “affirm” or “concede”, alongside “pronounce” and “endorse” (Martin/White 2005: 97-98, 117-132). Together these various modes of ENGAGEMENT were taken to account for a variety of linguistic resources, such as modality, concession, and reporting, used for heteroglossically construing the writer’s intersubjective stance towards the propositions made and the ways this stance made the issue of alignment, misalignment, or neutrality central to writer-reader relationships in heteroglossic text.

The linguistic analysis of ENGAGEMENT was manually checked for accuracy of coding by two raters (including this author) to ensure reliability of the coding scheme and minimize subjectivity in coding data. Overall,

as prosodic structure (Martin 2003) to construct an evaluative stance (Lemke 1998; Martin/Rose 2003; Hood 2006).

<sup>2</sup> By contrast, ATTITUDE is concerned with one’s personal feelings (emotional reactions, judgements of people and appreciations of objects), while GRADUATION considers how language functions to amplify or diminish the attitude and engagement conveyed by a text (Martin/White 2005).

then, the choice for this analytical procedure was to provide a qualitative and quantitative analysis of evaluative resources used in a representative corpus of blog posts on Covid-19 and the ways in which they play significance and role in this kind of evaluative discourse.

### **3. Analysis and discussion**

Based on this data analytical procedure, it is now possible to look into how linguistic resources of heteroglossic ENGAGEMENT operate in both frequency and function across the samples.

#### ***3.1. Heteroglossic ENGAGEMENT: overall data***

Upon close inspection of the sampled texts, a total of 1,474 ENGAGEMENT items were identified across the sample texts, providing a repertoire of stance meaning-making resources for heteroglossic utterances alongside their potential effects on audience construal in this generic form of public discourse. By the same token, such frequency counts reflect careful decisions about what needs to be spelled out in the broader expression of evaluation across blog posts.

#### ***3.2. Heteroglossic ENGAGEMENT resources by frequency and function***

In line with this, Table 1 below provides a full perspective of the overall frequency counts of heteroglossic resources for ENGAGEMENT employed in the samples.

Subsystem					N°	%	
ENGAGEMENT	Heteroglossing	Expansion	Entertain		702	48	
			Attribute	Acknowledge		123	8
				Distance		64	4
			<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>187</b>	13	
		<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>889</b>	60		
		Contraction	Disclaim	Deny		112	7
				Counter		144	10
				<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>256</b>	17
			Proclaim	Concur		146	10
				Endorse		98	7
				Pronounce		85	6
				<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>329</b>	23
		<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>585</b>	40		
		<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>1,474</b>	100		

Table 1

Overall frequency of heteroglossic ENGAGEMENT resources across blog posts.

As can be seen in this Table, a variety of heteroglossic options are used to engage in dialogically relevant positions for social relations and to highlight the key dimensions of negotiation and persuasion sought for by the blog writers through the interpersonal aspects of discourse. Of course, it is difficult to be precise about the processes involved in choosing one positioning option over another from the frequencies in the Table. However, allocating a dialogically heteroglossic roadmap to the posts tell us about the interests, intentions, identities, ideologies, or values of the blog writers construing and negotiating an interpersonal space for positions of alignment, misalignment, or even neutrality with prior viewpoints and anticipating the readers' responses at different levels of meaning-making in texts unfolding in the larger discourse of Covid-19.

While Table 1 has much to say about this rhetorical plan, it mostly shows that blog writers prefer expansive forms (60%) to contractive forms (40%) of their heteroglossic locutions, although considerable differences are still observable in some other individual forms used for such locutions. This



is shown overall by expansive *entertain* resources holding the lion's share of all heteroglossic realizations (48%), with *acknowledge* (8%) and *distance* resources (4%) ranking at the bottom of the range, suggesting a choice of how best writers seek to involve other viewpoints by varying the terms of their utterances and meanings that are at stake interpersonally. Within contraction, we also see that the nature of the writers' proposition is slightly more oriented towards *proclaiming* (23%) rather than *disclaiming* (17%), allowing for other labels as well (*deny*, *concur*, etc.) to occur pretty evenly distributed across the samples.

### 3.3. Heteroglossing: rhetorical options for dialogic expansion

Beginning with heteroglossing cases of dialogic *expansion*, different kinds of *entertain* resources are realized in the current corpus through the bulk of epistemic modal auxiliaries and epistemic modal adjuncts, occurring with first-person epistemic stance lexical verbs (cognitive, inferential, evidential) or indefinite generic subjects, alongside impersonal or passive constructions and rhetorical questions, suggesting why these most commonly used resources are heavily packed into the posts.

In the set of differently lexicalized and grammaticalized *entertain* examples below, we see blog writers overtly grounding their statements in their own subjectivity and a range of possible alternatives to what they think might be the case for an interactive audience:

- (1) It **seems plausible**, therefore, that the extent to which serious health conditions are or are not well-treated and therefore are or are not experienced as disabling [...].
- (2) Experience during pandemics **suggests** that it is an effective measure to limit transmission of the disease.
- (3) New variants **will** motivate new vaccines and new vaccination campaigns **may** be needed.
- (4) The government **should** actively seek to support employment, **maybe** through a jobs guarantee.
- (5) Health **must** remain a higher priority for governments so as to prevent a further squeeze on health systems, which **would likely** worsen access to elective surgical treatment.
- (6) *I think* mental health service users certainly have a real role to play in co-production, and this is another issue of intersectionality.

(7) *One might argue* that a centralised policy response **could** never maximise benefits for everyone, no matter how nuanced the approach.

(8) So why were we not better prepared for COVID-19? A popular **hypothesis** is that we prepared for the wrong pandemic, and an outbreak of influenza was **most likely**.

These writers are not just talking about different facets of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as those angled through perceived risks of virus transmission or through policy measures to increase employment, and providing the most visible expression of their personal role or identity in the text by the use of a first-person exclusive pronoun (*I*). They are also investing their blogs with a range of prospective rhetorical options used to anticipate audience response and modulate their statements at critical points in the unfolding of discourse, such as by making assessments of likelihood through modal auxiliaries (e.g. *may, might*), including *must/should* to indicate the degree of certainty of the proposition, by modal attributes (e.g. *It seems plausible that*), by first-person cognition verbs (e.g. *I think that*), by an indefinite generic subject (*One might argue that*) to minimize responsibility for the writer's comment, or by a rhetorical question to require the writer to guess possible answers to a question ( ...? *A popular hypothesis is that ... was most likely*). So, these kinds of heteroglossically expansive propositions made from a set of *entertain* resources help the writers not only to handle their discourse in various ways and display their stance towards the relevant information, but most significantly to open up a discursive, dialogistically 'entertained' space for readers to raise their likely objections about the validity of propositions and adopt positions towards the issues under discussion. Yet, the dialogistic role of such propositions is doing more than just allowing blog writers to present their arguments with appropriate qualification and stance. It becomes an important part of how writers 'identify themselves' with such arguments, and how these arguments turn on the writers' ideology or value system that is influenced by personal opinions and identities in the current discourse.

Engaging with other positions also finds its way into the expansive *attribute* cases through *acknowledgments* and *distances*. In this corpus, *acknowledgments* are mostly achieved through the use of a cited source, either as a human/non-human subject with a reporting verb (such as *argue, believe, declare, say, think*) in direct and indirect speech, or as part of an adjunct agent phrase (*According to ...*). So, in the examples below, attribution sees the writers as *acknowledging* the propositions advanced by external voices through 'projected' *that*-clauses for indirect discourse (9-11), or through an adjunct agent structure (12), providing this time a retrospective orientation to previously expressed opinions about the impact of coronavirus on health or other related domains:

(9) **Respondents who are planning to be vaccinated think that** about 57% of the people around them will do the same; **those who aren't think that** only 17% of the people around them will.

(10) **The World Medical Association insists that** everyone has the right to work in a safe environment without the threat of violence.

(11) In terms of non-medical interventions, **this report argues that** there is not enough evidence to justify mask-wearing by the general public, rejects closing borders in the event of a pandemic, [...].

(12) These religious manifestations of community – in services, meals, and Big Iftars – encourage encounter, stimulate discussion, and reinforce identities; they are, **according to British philosopher de Botton**, “what help to hold our fractious and fragile societies together”.

Put differently, these blog writers *acknowledge* a prior position when they cite some other source but do not explicitly indicate their own stance. In this way, such writers are simply neutral about the external source they bring in to negotiate their arguments about the issues under consideration, thus leaving it open to understand where their voice stands – whether it is aligned or misaligned with respect to those voices.

In (13), by contrast, we see the blog writer overtly *distancing* himself from a reported proposition, not least because of a *counter (but)* clause for some contrary position, as examined immediately below, indicating the impossibility of anything other than what is being stated by the writer's voice:

(13) **Politicians have been repeating that** ‘no one is safe until everyone is safe’, *but when it comes to global financial aid few concrete actions have matched those lofty words.*

Essentially, this writer is being unpersuaded by the text inside quotes because the semantics of the attributed material creates a problematization in areas with heavy burden on politics and finance. So, the writer disapproves of a prior position being advanced on the issue by politicians themselves, and presents his own text (the pandemic turning global financial actions upside down) as misaligned with respect to that position.

In all such *attribution* cases (*acknowledging* and *distancing*), therefore, blog writers are able to cast several possible heteroglossic, expanding positions on their internal voice and ‘engage’ interactively with those positions.

### 3.4. Heteroglossing: rhetorical options for dialogic contraction

Through dialogic *contraction*, blog writers challenge the position of others and invoke a range of alternative viewpoints through linguistic resources that *disclaim* specific meanings. In this corpus, two subtypes of *disclaim* meanings are covered: *deny*, misaligning the writer with the explicit or implicit position holder through negation (such as *no*, *not*, *nothing*, *never*), and *counter*, providing the writer's response to a presupposition with a contrary statement through conjunctions and connectives (such as, *although*, *despite*, *however*, and *but*), or through certain adjuncts that mark counter-expectation meanings (such as, *even*, *still*).

Under these labels, therefore, a variety of *disclaim* examples below show just how writers are overtly *denying* arguments through the functionality of negation in (14-17), and in this way they introduce an alternative position into the dialogue and similarly curb the heteroglossic space for writer-reader relationship:

(14) We are not flying completely blind here. There is **no** prior information that can be brought to bear on this issue.

(15) It **is not** the biology of viruses that makes RNA an important topic for HPLS.

(16) Populations **do not** all face the same risk of contracting or dying from COVID.

(17) Democratic oversight in the form of parliamentary scrutiny and external engagement **never** leads to better quality law and policy when governments adapt to criticism.

Or, in (18-22), we see how writers are *countering* several other arguments and bringing the readers around to their opinions and value positions in the ongoing heteroglossic dialogue:

(18) **Although** we do not know that these “forced savings” represent an increase in household well-being, they may at least give people the buffer they need to face future crises or job losses and increase wealth.

(19) In lower-income or middle-income countries, the patterns have been less clear. **However**, the pandemic poverty penalty may have important consequences for the measurement of welfare in these countries.

(20) The myriad of regulations introduced under these acts (and with very limited scrutiny) has translated into hypertrophied executive dominance **but** not necessarily better governance.

(21) **While** doctors, epidemiologists and others in biomedical research have valid insights on these issues, we cannot rely on scientists alone to make calls on questions that are affecting us all, profoundly, every day.

(22) There may **even** be further domino effects that we cannot measure yet – reduced spending by the high-income on transportation or retail may, in turn, drive job losses and reduced incomes for low-income workers employed in these industries.

*Disclaim* strategies like these not only draw the communicative functionality of propositions and meanings together with reader-oriented materials, such as those with law, welfare and epidemiology issues in subject focus, they also square certain *denials* (*It is not the biology / Populations do not all face*) with the most logical, polar opposite of the positive meanings implied ideologically by the generic writers, as they look through the mist hanging above a variety of Covid-19 issues alongside their alignment strategy with potential readers.

Through dialogic *contraction*, blog writers are also able to *proclaim* specific meanings rather than limiting the range of alternative viewpoints in the heteroglossic space of current discourse. In this corpus, *proclaim* meanings are realized by *concur*s that signal the writer's positive alignment with a proposition through specific lexical items (such as, *naturally*), by *endorse* statements that attribute propositions to external sources and frame these propositions as “maximally warrantable” (Martin/White 2005: 126) through specific verb forms (such as, *find* and *show*), and by *pronounce* expressions that indicate a writer's emphasis or interpolation (such as, *the fact is / the reality is, I claim / we hold* and clausal intensifiers such as *actually, strongly*). In this corpus, however, *concur* can either occur as an *affirm* (such as, *obviously*) or *concede* statement (such as, *admittedly*).

So, in the examples below (23-25), we see blog writers overtly *concurring* with propositions to establish generally agreed information, or shared knowledge in the ongoing communicative context, or otherwise *concurring* with a *concede* argument and thereafter dismissing it via a *countering* argument (26), thus ruling out any dialogistic alternatives:

(23) The role of epidemiologists and infectious disease specialists is **obvious** for a pandemic response, [...].

(24) **Certainly**, Governments around the world were slow to react to AIDS. A UK Cabinet Committee was not set up until 1986 [...].

(25) Instrumentalising face masks for political ends does not necessarily conflict with public health. **In fact**, political face masks shoot two birds with one stone. It enables political actors to achieve [...].

(26) **Admittedly**, over the course of 19 months, the global community and local authorities did funnel a significant amount of money and personpower into the response, but aid in turn became a focus for competition between armed groups and the role of local communities remained unheard.

But writers can also *endorse* propositions through verbal processes to neutrally indicate the means by which correct, reliable information was acquired from external sources, thus representing the ways in which they retrospectively ‘engage’ with other voices and how they stand in relation to other such value positions in the current discourse:

(27) The recent research on US households **shows that** those are mostly high-income people (Cravino et al. 2020).

(28) Ketki Sheth and Greg C Wright (2020), using a sample of university students, **found that** neither risk nor social preferences or pre-existing health conditions are predictive of compliance.

(29) A recent study whose results were published in the American Chemical Society **revealed that** fitting cloth masks improperly could leave gaps between the face and the masks leading to a filtration inefficiency of more than 60%.

Finally, instances of the *pronounce* type through interpolations or intensifiers allow the blog writers to attest to, or assure the value of their own propositions, as writers now tend to get behind their ideas that have a good chance of being accepted in the dialogistic space of writer-reader relationship:

(30) On populism, **the reality is that** non-populists are more likely to listen to expert advice and acknowledge scientific facts [...].

(31) **We claim that** sacred spaces still play an important and unique function, not only as theological centres, or the vertical function of worship, but also as community centres.

(32) But there is more. The notion of herd immunity produces a series of paradoxes that **actually** undermines the very idea itself. [...] In that spirit, **I declare** herd immunity in today’s situation a dangerous technocratic fool’s errand, without any basis in fact or science.

Just as these *pronounce* formulations serve to provide assurance or confirmation of a particular issue on debate, so too they offer the most explicit writer’s voice intruding into the texts through an exclusive *I* pronoun, suggesting again that these writers cannot avoid projecting an impression of themselves and how they stand in relation to their arguments, as already seen

before. So, while we may see this discourse self as a personal preference determined by the writer's experience, confidence, and so on, what is seen as logical and relevant in this interactive process is the writers' ability to be more explicit about their identity-constructing stance in the target discourse alongside the ideological attitudes and values they hold in response to the coronavirus pandemic addressed from a crosswise perspective (public health and other domains).

#### 4. Further remarks and conclusion

This study has relied on the APPRAISAL framework to describe and interpret research-focused commentary blogs on Covid-19 as rhetorically-oriented sites of text, discourse and genre, demonstrating something of the functionality of evaluative and interpersonal aspects of language that are relevant to the framework of dialogistic positioning construed under the heading of ENGAGEMENT.

In this, corpus-informed instantiations of APPRAISAL language have shown variation in the choice and function of ENGAGEMENT resources, foregrounding how best blog writers lay the groundwork for their own *ethos* as they activate evaluative stances towards their own or other value positions referenced by the texts and pull readers along with the Covid-19 related health issues discussed in the public-facing genre. More specifically, reliance on a diverse array of linguistic resources for dialogistic *expansion* and *contraction* demonstrates that writers can vary the dialogic status of their propositions and create strategies by which their own or other value positions are addressed 'to engage with' communicative claims. So, writers can present themselves as making an allowance for (i.e. expand) or challenging the scope (i.e. contract) of alternative positions advanced in the texts, and in these ways they orient the ENGAGEMENT system to the meaning in context and the rhetorical effect of a dialogue within texts. This array of dialogic resources also clarifies that blogging about Covid-19 effectively depends on the individual writer's control in framing intersubjective positions and meanings for the audience to see as most appropriate and persuasive in writer-reader interaction, and to similarly elucidate a context for writer's interpretation through a variety of evaluative positionings. Consequently, the overall dialogic repertoire of evaluative stance meaning-making resources for 'engagement' provides a picture of the writers' credentials in having a mixed set of varying beliefs, experiences, expectations and value positions constructed for their heteroglossic texts and potentially shared by their readers, and supports the ways generic writers offer a pitch for identity-based

ideological positionings unfolding cumulatively in the texts as they explore the global discourse about Covid-19 pandemic.

Because the particular evaluative and persuasive workings of individual texts emphasize the importance of connecting independent beliefs and value positions to shared experience and knowledge, *appraising* a whole host of Covid-19 issues also becomes significant for the ways blog writers make their rhetorical and interpretive activities impactful in the public-facing genre. Recognising the importance of such activities means reconciling the central role of the genre in joining writers, texts, and readers together in virtual public spheres. This is to say that genre writers are not only addressing a wider readership with whom to share topics using the affordances of the social medium, but also treating their texts as socially situated attempts to communicate with readers what is at stake when they make rhetorical choices from a variety of social (intersubjective) positionings referenced by the texts and made available by evaluative language.

Besides, such activities turn on the impact of blog writing at a time when discourses of Covid-19 attend to a multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary approach to the crisis and serve as springboards for critical perspectives on intersections across public health, economy, sociology, law, and other fields. This is nothing new since we are living in a world of greater interdependence that requires multidisciplinary solutions across discursive and professional practices to better understand the current health crisis, signifying that human health is more than just a medical concept. In line with this, transcending disciplinary walls to make connections across disciplines and understand recurring features of crisis discourse around public health shows just how blog writers are pulling together content from multiple disciplinary views and perspectives of the crisis surfacing with this pandemic (economic, sociological, or legal), thus taking account of the interrelationship across discourses of Covid-19 and public health in the writing of the genre. The upshot of these genre-based discursive activities is that blogging about Covid-19 provides the scope for negotiating interdisciplinary, or more appropriately, interdiscursive professional ‘voices’ and practices under the pandemic risk and crisis communication effected by the genre writers themselves. After all, the COVID-19 crisis is as much a communication and social crisis as it is a health crisis constructed, consumed, and exchanged within and across discourse practices and (social) media genres, and provides input on how to best communicate and integrate interdisciplinary efforts in global policy making. At this point, one might reasonably wonder which professional and disciplinary view of the Covid-19 pandemic blog writers are mostly standing with, or standing against, when they construe value positions for their dialogistic texts, whether it be from sociologists, lawyers, economists, or others. The simple honest answer here is that this would



require a future content-driven analysis of Covid-19 blogs – one which focuses on systematic reading of texts to code meaningful pieces of content, more generally. However, it suffices to say that whenever blog writers evaluate discourses of Covid-19 crisis in the chosen corpus, their utterances are always differently ‘stanced’ towards prior representations/views of this crisis from multiple disciplines, signifying that they are mixed to gain insights from diverse stakeholder ‘voices’ and to attract their specific relevance for health communication through the evaluative and discursive activities of the genre.

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## Corpus

LSE Covid-19 blog posts available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/>