Multimodal irony in public responses to digitally mediated NHS COVID-19 messaging

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Abstract

This study investigates how multimodal irony is discursively constructed in the expression of stance and evaluation in comments responding to the UK National Health Service's (NHS) COVID-19 policy posts on Twitter/X. Using a discursive pragmatic approach, we identified and analysed comments containing instances of multimodal irony targeting COVID-19 policies, institutional authorities, and policy supporters. Our analysis shows that multimodal irony enables users to express negative stance and evaluation indirectly, reframe institutional messaging, and construct in-group alignment among those expressing dissatisfaction by creating and conventionalising semiotic signals. We argue Twitter/X's platform features, including textual brevity, multimodal richness, threaded interaction, and perceived anonymity, to be critical factors in enabling the construction and circulation of such content. While we do not claim that the comment dataset we analyse represents general public opinion, the ironic responses identified may nonetheless carry communicative influence with other social media users due to their perceived authenticity and peer-like positioning. This influence is likely amplified by platform dynamics which favour affectively loaded and oppositional content, leading to an overrepresentation of dissenting voices relative to more compliant or non-evaluative responses. Significantly, these comments form part of the broader discursive ecosystem of digital crisis communication – in this case, relating to COVID-19 – in which institutional messages are not passively received but actively evaluated, reinterpreted and reframed. This study additionally offers an empirically grounded framework for identifying and analysing multimodal irony in social media discourse and highlights its relevance for understanding the negotiation of institutional legitimacy in digitally mediated contexts of public health communication.

Keywords: irony, multimodality, digital discourse, public health communication, crisis communication.

1.   Introduction

Social media has emerged as a vital platform for institutional communication during public health crises. It facilitates real-time dissemination of policy updates, allowing the public to access official information quickly and easily (Collins & Koller, 2023). While online responses to public health messaging cannot be assumed to fully represent public opinion, especially given issues such as bot interference, user demographic imbalances, and uneven patterns of engagement (Statista, 2024), they are often treated as authentic individual expressions in public, institutional, and research contexts. This assumption is shared by members of the public (Cai et al., 2022), and is also reflected in how institutional communicators use social media data to gauge public opinion (Graham et al., 2015), as well as in certain strands of public opinion research (Pavlova & Berkers, 2020).

Together with the institutional messaging, such public responses form a dynamic 'discursive ecosystem' (AUTHOR) – a networked, multimodal environment of messages, stances, and evaluations. Such discursive ecosystems can influence attitudes towards policy implementation and compliance, as audiences' perceptions of official messages can be shaped quite profoundly by others' responses, including those expressed through comments (AUTHOR). Within these discursive ecosystems, stance and evaluation are often expressed indirectly. One strategy for such indirect expression is irony, which allows commenters to voice criticism or resistance while avoiding direct confrontation (Claridge, 2001). Irony can also function persuasively, influencing how audiences interpret the original message and perceive its author and target (Burgers et al., 2016). On social media, irony is often multimodal, incorporating such features as emoji, memes and hashtags. Yet the discursive constructions of such multimodal irony, and the discursive effects they produce within the discursive ecosystem, remains largely underexplored, particularly in the context of (digital) public health communication.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating multimodal expressions of irony in response to the NHS's COVID-19 policy communications on *Twitter* (now *X*). Drawing on a discursive pragmatic perspective, our analysis answers three questions:

(1) How do commenters construct multimodal irony to express stance and evaluation in response to NHS COVID-19 policy-related posts?
(2) How do *Twitter/X*'s affordances shape such expressions?
(3) How does multimodal irony position the responses within the wider discursive ecosystem of NHS COVID-19 policy communication on *Twitter/X*?

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews previous literature and lays the theoretical foundation for the analysis. Section 3 details our methodology, including data collection, corpus construction and the criteria used to identify cases of multimodal irony. Section 4 presents the findings, and Section 5 discusses their implications with regard to *Twitter/X*'s affordances and the broader dynamics of public responses to digitally mediated health messaging during crises.

2.   Multimodal irony in social media discourse

2.1.   Multimodal irony from a discursive pragmatic perspective

This study approaches irony from a discursive pragmatic perspective. Discourse pragmatics, as an interdisciplinary field, holds that a comprehensive theory of discourse must incorporate pragmatic dimensions, just as pragmatic analysis requires attention to discursive patterns (van Dijk, 2010 [1981]). From this perspective, irony can be understood as a form of evaluative stance, realised through various semiotic resources, implied by speakers, inferred by audiences, and jointly negotiated in interaction (Culpeper et al., 2018). Irony has long been associated with pragmatic notions such as the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975) and Neo-Gricean Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Grice (1975) considers that an expression is ironic only if it intentionally flouts a conversational maxim (i.e., guidelines for rational language use). Sperber and Wilson (1986) extend this by arguing that verbal irony is inherently echoic; i.e., it references a prior proposition while distancing the speaker through a dissociative evaluative stance.

Synthesising these accounts (e.g., Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983; Sperber & Wilson, 1986) with later developments (e.g., Claridge, 2001; Culpeper et al., 2017), four interrelated features of irony emerge. First, irony involves *incongruity* – a disassociation between surface expression

and intended meaning (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Culpeper et al., 2017). Second, irony often functions echoically (i.e., *echoic mention*), referencing prior speech or shared social beliefs – either explicitly or implicitly (Claridge, 2001). Third, irony conveys a *(negatively) evaluative stance*, often hostile or derogatory in tone (Grice, 1991; Leech, 1983). Fourth, irony typically relies on *conversational implicature*, conveying the intended meaning indirectly and thus reduce the risk of open conflict (Claridge, 2001; Leech, 1983).

Another defining characteristic of the comments analysed in this study is their multimodal composition. Communication is rarely realised through language alone, but through the coordination of multiple semiotic resources (O'Halloran, 2021; AUTHOR). This observation has been central to the work in social semiotics, where multimodality refers to the integration of different semiotic modes within a communicative process (van Leeuwen, 2005). From this perspective, meaning-making is shaped by given communicative context as well as by communicators' semiotic choices (Jewitt, 2014). A multimodal approach is therefore crucial for understanding the nuances of real-world communication (van Leeuwen, 1996), especially on richly multi-semiotic, digital platforms like *Twitter/X*.

2.2.   Irony in social media discourse

Building on this discursive pragmatic perspective on multimodal irony, we now outline the motivations and functions of irony in social media discourse. Studies such as those by Culpeper et al. (2017) and Simpson (2003) reveal the multifunctional nature of irony, which can serve affective, social, and intellectual purposes, demonstrating significant flexibility and complexity. This versatility also contributes to irony's strategic potential, making it possible to operate as both a face-saving and face-threatening act.

From a face-saving standpoint, irony enables speakers to express criticism or aggression without engaging in overt conflict. Leech's (1983, p.82) Irony Principle captures this by allowing individuals to "cause offence" obliquely, preserving politeness and reducing the likelihood of social conflict. Partington et al. (2013) further argue that implicit irony often carries a humorous intent that softens criticism. Even when irony becomes more explicit, as with sarcasm, it can be labelled as deniable aggression (Culpeper et al., 2017), offering speakers a degree of social protection if their statement triggers direct retaliation. This may also help to explain why ironic humour has been frequently observed in resistance discourses on social media (Nikunen, 2018; AUTHOR; Samanani et al., 2023), as it enables users to voice dissent in a more socially accepted form.

Conversely, as noted, irony can also be face-threatening, particularly when used to express intolerance or more overt resistance. Indeed, Simpson (2003) points out that irony, especially in its satirical forms, can render certain views or actions intolerable, thereby excluding them from legitimate discourse. This exclusionary potential may be increased by irony's reliance on shared contextual knowledge, which is not universally accessible and can therefore reinforce in-group boundaries. In social media contexts, irony often performs a grouping function: it strengthens shared identities while marginalising perceived out-groups (Gal, 2019; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). This phenomenon is especially evident in multimodal social media discourse, where linguistic and visual elements co-construct the potential for aligning with certain ideological stances and distancing from others (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2017).

While much research on irony on social media has focused on its linguistic forms (e.g., Reyes et al., 2012), an increasing number of studies are attending to its multimodal manifestations, too (e.g., Gal, 2019; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Zappavigna, 2022). For example,

Zappavigna (2022) introduces the idea of parodic resonance to explain how ironic quotations of "*it is what it is*" circulated across platforms as a means of ridiculing then-US president Donald Trump. Her analysis extends beyond monomodal quotations to include multimodal instances using hashtags and memes, which act as paralinguistic cues that guide the interpretation of irony. Gal (2019) examines irony's boundary function, showing how ironic humour in decontextualised digital environments can serve as a segregating tool through polysemy (i.e., interpretative openness arising from multiple plausible readings). Hakoköngäs et al. (2020), focusing on far-right movements, illustrate how (ironic) memes can be used to crystallise ideological arguments, strengthen group identity, and attract new audiences.

2.3.   The present study

Previous research on irony has focussed mostly on monomodal, linguistic expressions (e.g., Nikunen, 2018; Reyes et al., 2012). While recent studies have, as noted, begun to explore multimodal irony in social media contexts many lack explicit, operationalised criteria for identifying multimodal irony on social media and do not consider how such expressions are shaped by platform-specific affordances. Consequently, little is known about what constitutes multimodal irony, how it is used to perform stance-taking and evaluation, and how it is shaped by the features of social media platforms like *Twitter/X*. This issue is especially pressing with regard to digitally mediated public health communication, wherein multimodal irony can emerge in response to institutional messages for, *inter alia*, expressing scepticism towards, critique of or misalignment with, public health policies and initiatives. Understanding the discursive force of such ironic responses, including the multimodal discursive strategies through which they are realised, is thus relevant not only from a linguistic perspective but also for health communication professionals seeking to improve the efficacy of their digital messaging.

Responding to this need, this study systematically examines multimodal expressions of irony in *Twitter/X* replies to posts conveying official COVID-19 policy instructions, sent from the NHS's *Twitter/X* account (@NHSuk). It provides explicit identification criteria for multimodal irony, explores how irony is expressed in this context through a combination of linguistic and visual elements, and considers how *Twitter/X*'s affordances shape such expression. This study thus also aims to offer an approach for identifying and examining multimodal expressions of irony on *Twitter/X* and other short-form social media platforms, contributing in this way to the small but growing body of research on (online) multimodal irony.

3.   Methodology

3.1.   Data collection

This research forms part of a broader project investigating the UK NHS's multimodal communication of COVID-19 policy instructions on *Twitter/X*, alongside the corresponding audience responses (AUTHOR). NHS posts were collected using *Twitter/X*'s Advanced Search function, applying the following criteria: (1) Keywords: 'covid', 'covid-19', 'covid19', and 'coronavirus' (in English); (2) Account: @NHSuk; (3) Filters: excluding replies but including links to capture NHS-initiated threads; (4) Date range: 2 December 2020 (approval of first UK COVID-19 vaccines) to 21 February 2022 (lifting of restrictions announced by the then-Prime Minister of the UK, Boris Johnson). After manually removing false positives (e.g., posts meeting these criteria but not directly related to COVID-19 policies), 638 NHS posts remained.

To support the analysis of comments, the 64 NHS posts (top 10%) with the highest combined totals of comments, (quote) reposts and likes were selected by summing their raw engagement counts. This composite metric was used to as an indicator of general visibility and interaction. We recognise that selecting highly engaged posts may foreground responses that express disagreement or heightened affect as, in general, users who oppose tend to interact more visibly than silent supporters (Tsugawa & Ohsaki, 2015; Wang & Lee, 2021). While this might introduce an imbalance in stance distribution, it aligns with our analytical focus on multimodal ironic cases, which often emerges through oppositional evaluative stances (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

We then used ExportComments.com, a third-party data extraction service, to collect the textual components (e.g., language, emoji, hashtags) of the comments responding directly to these 64 NHS posts, using the corresponding URL links. As part of the broader project (AUTHOR), we conducted a pilot study on a random 10% of the threads to assess the presence of nested replies (i.e., replies to other users rather than to the NHS). This check identified only one such instance, indicating that nested replies were rare in this dataset. On this basis, the analysis was restricted to direct responses to the NHS posts, consistent with the study's focus on public responses to institutional messaging. External sources (e.g., memes, images, quoted reposts) embedded in the comments were manually collected. This process yielded 2,353 comments, which formed the general corpus from which we identified instances of multimodal irony.

3.2. Multimodal social media corpus construction

We used ATLAS.ti to process the multimodal social media corpus and conduct subsequent analysis. ATLAS.ti is well-suited to multimodal research on social media corpora, as it allows researchers to link and integrate textual data with their external sources. It supports both quantitative and qualitative analyses of cross-modal relationships, a capacity that is less well developed in other software (AUTHOR). In our project, we imported the NHS posts and corresponding comments, engagement metrics and *Twitter/X* links into ATLAS.ti using the "Survey" category. These were then organised into post-comment threads. Using ATLAS.ti's "Network" function, we manually linked the textual elements with their corresponding external sources, creating a coherent, thread-structured multimodal corpus for further annotation and analysis.

3.3. Identification of multimodal expressions of irony

Although irony has, as we have alluded, been richly theorised from a discursive pragmatic perspective (see Section 2.1), identifying instances of (multimodal) irony in empirical data remains methodologically challenging. Irony is context-sensitive and inferential, influenced by cognitive, pragmatic and sociocultural factors. Its interpretation often hinges on implicit meaning and shared insider knowledge, which may not be accessible to all audiences – especially those who might be unfamiliar with the referenced event or who may not aligned with the speaker's stance (Claridge, 2001; Taylor, 2017).

Many studies of irony on social media rely on explicit cues or automatic heuristics, including using hashtags (e.g., #irony, #ironic, #sarcasm) (Reyes et al., 2012; Reyes et al., 2013; Schifanella et al., 2016). However, such posts, which are explicitly marked for irony in this way, are not only relatively infrequent but such markers may actually provide a somewhat unreliable indicator of irony, with one study finding that only 15% of such posts actually

contain sarcasm (Sykora et al., 2020)[1]. Other possible cues include rhetorical questions, understatements (Partington et al., 2013), capitalisation and exclamation marks (Culpeper et al., 2017), emoticons (Thompson & Filik, 2016) and memes that may be culturally recognised as ironic (Ntouvlis & Geenen, 2023). While helpful in some contexts, none of these features is likely to be able to consistently capture all cases. Demjén (2016) utilised the Humour Maxim Principle (i.e., treating the ongoing conversation as inherently humorous) to identify humorous threads within a UK-based cancer forum, using their titles and initial posts as cues. However, this approach relies on the assumption that the initiating post sets a humorous frame, which is incompatible with the present study, as NHS COVID-19 policy messages are found formal, informative, and serious in tone (AUTHOR). The handful of annotation schemes provided also vary in granularity. Van Hee et al. (2016), for example, offer a five-step guideline for annotating linguistic irony on social media, incorporating features such as polarity between literal and intended evaluation and the appearance of incongruence in irony cases. While valuable, their guidebook does not fully address the indirectness at play in irony.

For the purposes of the present study, then, we adopted a manual, context-sensitive procedure grounded in discursive pragmatic theories (e.g.., Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1986, see Section 2). Our annotation framework was developed inductively through close engagement with the dataset, refined iteratively through inter-annotator discussion and structured around four features which are drawn both from theory and the affordances of the platform: negativity; indirectness; incongruity; and multimodality. While echoic mention is common in irony (see Section 2.1), it was not used as a necessary criterion here. Given the platform's threaded structure and the automatic "@" handle, replies are already contextually anchored to the target post, rendering additional forms of echoic reference unnecessary for establishing relevance – though such echoes may still occur.

(1) Negativity: The comment expresses a negative stance towards the target, either through offensiveness (Grice, 1975) or implied critique (Culpeper et al., 2017). Following Grice (1978), we adopt a broad interpretation of negativity that includes feelings, attitudes and evaluations.

(2) Indirectness: The negative evaluation is not stated explicitly but implied through conversational implicature. This aligns with pragmatic approaches such as relevance theory and politeness theory, where irony is conceptualised as a face-managing strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper et al., 2017; Taylor, 2017). Comments expressing direct or unambiguous critique were therefore excluded.

(3) Incongruity: There is a mismatch between the surface form of the comment and its intended evaluative meaning (Reyes et al., 2012; Schifanella et al., 2016; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). This may be located in contextual knowledge or the internal structure of the comment (Taylor, 2017).

(4) Multimodality: The comment employs both linguistic and visual elements in meaning-making. Based on patterns observed in the dataset, we considered three main configurations: (1) posts combining both linguistic and visual materials (see Example 3.1)[2]; (2) linguistic material with typographic or orthographic emphasis (e.g., italics) and paralinguistic cues (e.g., emojis & hashtags) (see Example 3.2); and (3) visual

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[1] Irony and sarcasm are related but not identical (Taylor, 2017). Some studies treat sarcasm as a subtype of irony while others view irony as the broader category (e.g., Culpeper et al., 2017; Simpson, 2003). This study includes references to sarcasm where relevant but focuses on irony.

[2] To ensure user anonymity, all examples were recreated using Tweetgen (https://www.tweetgen.com), a publicly accessible tool that replicates the appearance of Twitter/X posts without retaining identifying information.

material such as images, GIFs, or memes containing overlaid language (see Example 3.3).

Example 3.1
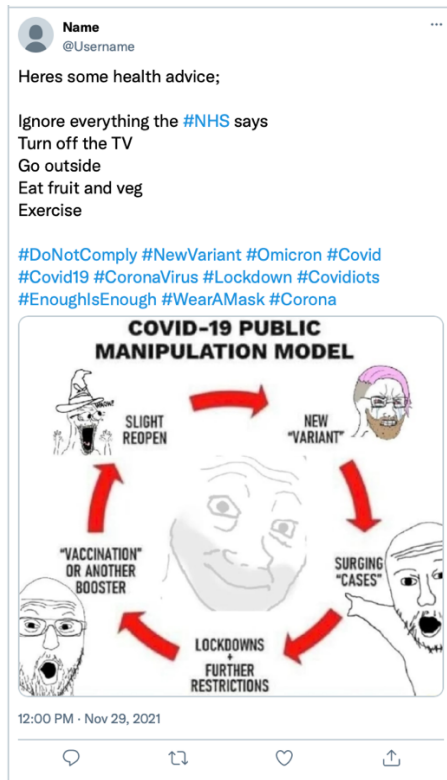
Example 3.2

Example 3.3

A final consideration in the identification process concerns ambiguity, which was particularly prescient due to the brevity of the posts. Following the Maxim of Quantity in Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle (i.e., providing neither too much nor too little information in conversation), many comments were extremely short, often relying on semantic ellipsis and/or pragmatic underspecification. This makes it difficult in some cases to determine whether the intended meaning differed from the expressed meaning. Ambiguous cases were jointly discussed by both authors, drawing on contextual information including, but not limited to, the different modes of the comment, the corresponding NHS message and our broader knowledge of COVID-19 discourses at the time the comment was posted. Comments were only included if both authors agreed they met the four criteria listed above.

Using this approach, we identified 162 comments (6.88% of the comments analysed) containing multimodal expressions of irony. None of them involved audio or video materials. Although some cases included GIFs, they were not treated as moving images; instead, the analysis focused on linguistic and static visual resources. The comments were annotated with ATLAS.ti following the Attitude dimension of the Appraisal Framework (Martin & White, 2005) (see Figure 3.1). This enabled us to analyse both the evaluation strategies and the evaluated targets, producing what Inwood and Zappavigna (2024) describe as *attitude-ideation couplings*. In Section 4, we group the comments according to their targets, and respond to the research questions set out earlier.
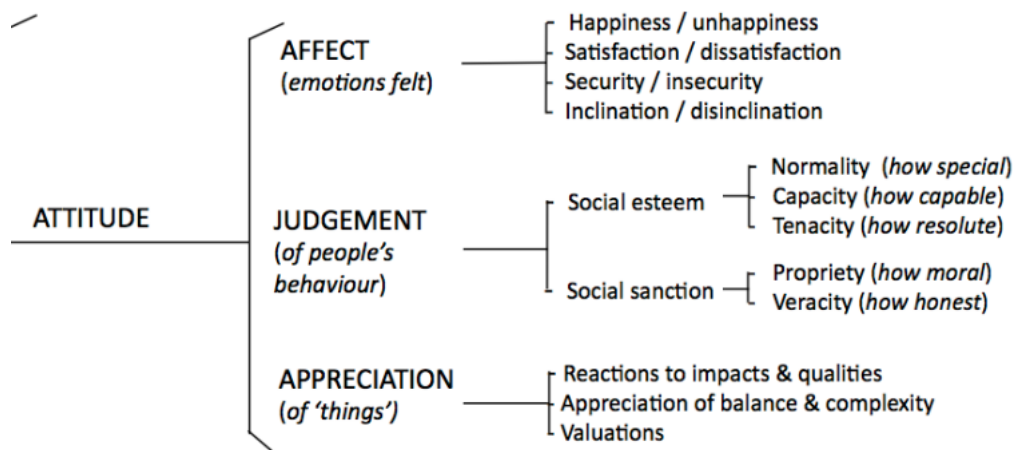

Figure 3.1. Attitude dimension of Appraisal Framework (Martin & White, 2005).

4.   Findings

In the multimodal ironic comments sampled, the vast majority (158 cases, 97.53%) expressed opposition to the stance in the corresponding NHS posts, 2 cases supported the stance, and 2 cases presented a mixed stance (agreeing with some aspects while rejecting others). Three prominent targets of the irony emerged: (1) COVID-19 policy messages (113 cases, 69.75%); (2) authority figures (46 cases, 28.40%), including the NHS and the UK government; and (3) policy supporters (20 cases, 12.35%)[3]. In this section, we examine how irony is directed at each of these targets, respectively.

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[3] Totals exceed 100% as some comments have multiple targets.

4.1.   Targeting COVID-19 policy messages

Among the multimodal ironic comments analysed, 113 cases (69.75%) target the COVID-19 policies communicated by the NHS. Unlike those directed at authority figures or policy supporters, these comments focus on critiquing the policies themselves, suggesting their perceived negative quality, value, or impact. One common strategy involves the combination of words with facial-expression emoji to create attitudinal incongruence: the text conveys the intended critical meaning, while the emoji feign politeness. In Example 1, the commenter appends a smiling face emoji 😃 to a superficially cooperative statement that appears to ease pressure on the NHS's vaccination booking system, which in fact functions as a veiled refusal to get vaccinated. The smiling emoji introduces a tone of mock friendliness that clashes with the critical stance expressed in the language of the post, thereby functioning as a paralinguistic cue (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024) – similar to tone or gesture in spoken discourse (Attardo et al., 2003). Here, it softens the negative appraisal while signalling an opposing stance.

Example 1

A reversed pattern – found in only 8 cases – features linguistically expressed (partial) compliance paired with negative emojis. In Example 2-2, a comment responding to an NHS post about multiple COVID-19 instructions (see Example 2-1) linguistically signals willingness to follow only the isolation policy and closes with a polite "thanks". This selective uptake implicitly rejects the remaining policies mentioned in the NHS post. The emoji sequence "🐂💩" (interpretable as "bullshit") foregrounds this negative appreciation of COVID-19 policies. Here, the critique depends on not only the implicitness in the linguistic framing, but also the indirectness of emoji and shared knowledge of their semantic and cultural associations.

Example 2-1
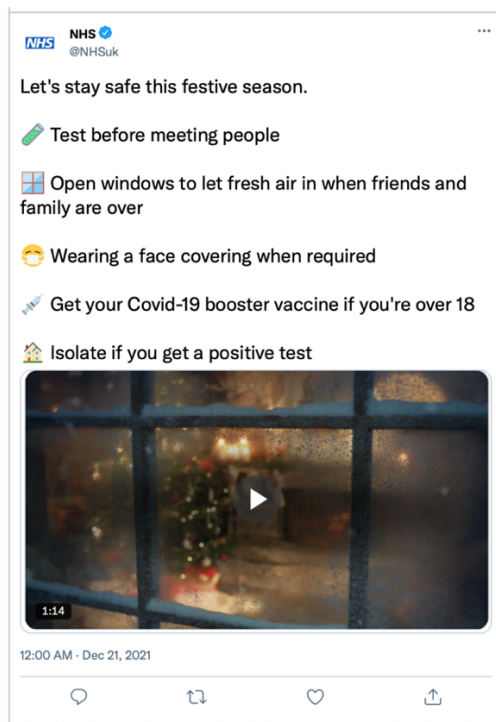
Example 2-2

Beyond signalling affective stance, emoji are also utilised to devalue policy compliance by juxtaposing it with leisure-related activities. These instances rely on shared understandings of emoji meanings to highlight the levity of the activities positioned as alternatives to following the guidance. In Example 3, the commenter insincerely apologises for not accepting the booster, citing a minor personal plan as the reason for non-compliance. The cocktail emoji contributes a kind of affective playfulness which is incongruous with the seriousness of the subject matter. Rather than directly mentioning the policy, the commenter exploits *Twitter/X*'s thread structure to position their response as a reply to the NHS's post, thereby implicitly responding to the vaccination message it communicates while suggesting disassociation from it.

Example 3

Building on these examples, a recurring pattern involves one mode conveying surface-level agreement while the other mode conveys the intended critique or devaluation. A second, related

strategy is echoic mimicry of multimodal elements of the corresponding institutional messages, initially suggesting alignment before introducing incongruous elements that reveal critique.

In Example 4-2, the commenter appears to support the corresponding NHS post (see Example 4-1), but echoing the "longer-term protection" with "10 more weeks" to subtly question the NHS's definition of "long term". The meme further reveals its critical stance with the phrase "for those who haven't died yet", suggesting the previous two vaccine doses were perceived to be harmful and implying similar effects from the booster (i.e., negative impact, according to appraisal theory).
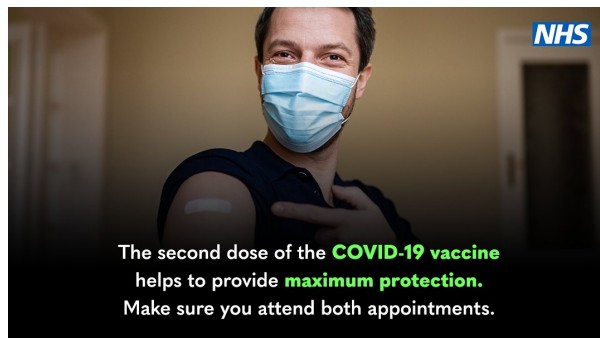
Example 4-1

Example 4-2

This echoic mimicry can extend to the visual mode, where NHS graphics are repurposed to appreciate its policy negatively. In Example 5-2, an NHS vaccination poster (see Example 5-1) is altered by replacing "COVID-19 vaccine" with "bioweapon" and "maximum protection" with "maximum depopulation", suggesting it to pose a harmful impact on people who receive vaccination. A bandage marked "fool" on the vaccinated arm further emphasises the ironic message, appraising the vaccinated individuals to be of negative capacity. This visual irony juxtaposes authoritative NHS branding with a conspiratorial framing, subverting the intended meaning while retaining the NHS's visual style.

Example 5-1

Example 5-2

A similar strategy appears in Examples 6 and 7, where commenters adopt the NHS's signature yellow-and-blue promotional ring, typically used in profile pictures to encourage vaccinations, but paired it with images of individuals suffering adverse effects, highlighting the perceived harmful impact of the vaccinations. In Example 6, the image depicts a man coughing and clutching his chest; in Example 7, a woman exhibits more extreme symptoms, including red eyes and foaming at the mouth. This incongruence between the support conveyed by the ring graphic (which suggests a positive stance towards vaccination measures on the part of the user) and the images of the visibly suffering individuals (suggesting an attribution of adverse health effects to the vaccinations), thus generates irony. In other words, the NHS ring signals
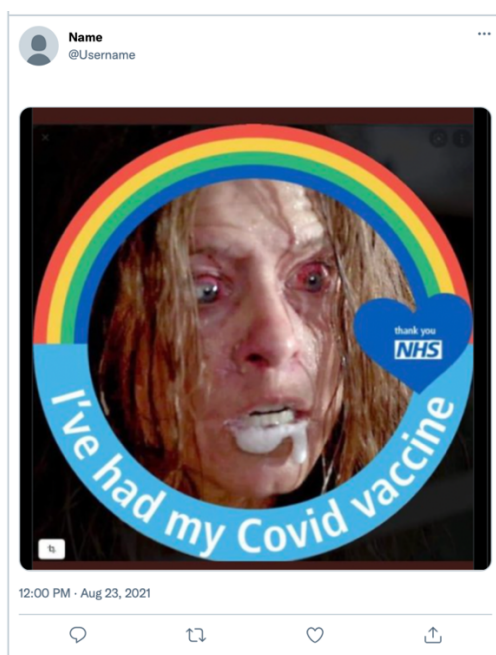
vaccination endorsement, but this is undermined by the accompanying imagery, producing a cross-modal ironic critique.

Example 6

Example 7

The final pattern in the posts targeting COVID-19 policy messages uses playful gaming formats to present critique under the guise of neutral or supportive discourse. One such format is the "guessing game", where the audience is invited to identify a policy described in critical harms. In Example 8, a meme adopts the visual frame of a game show, with the host asking: "NAME A PRODUCT THAT BLAMES ITS FAILURE ON THOSE WHO DON'T USE IT" (capitalisation as in original). The implied answer, as suggested by the corresponding NHS post, is the COVID Pass. The irony emerges from the contrast between the playfulness and light-heartedness of the quiz format on the one hand and the serious and politically charged

implication of the question, on the other. By embedding critique in a genre associated with entertainment, then, the comment enables stance-taking while avoiding overt confrontation.

Example 8

4.2.   Targeting authority figures

A second cluster of 46 comments (28.40%) targets authority figures responsible for policy implementation and communication, including the NHS and the UK government. These comments critique not necessarily specific policies but the perceived veracity and propriety of those in charge. While the criticism remains indirect, the irony often functions to delegitimise these figures through semiotic and evaluative incongruities to encode negative judgement.

One of the most frequently employed strategies is allusion (i.e., indirect reference to a well-known event, or the reuse of a recognisable fragment of an earlier source (Machacek, 2007)), typically comparing pandemic authorities to regimes associated with Nazism, Fascism, or totalitarian control. In Example 9, an ironic meme references a film scenario captioned "Fascism. Wonderful". The apparently positive evaluation invites a reading based on pragmatic implicature, whereby shared cultural knowledge that fascism is condemned triggers a re-evaluation of the message, prompting readers to recover the negative evaluation beneath its surface-level positive appreciation. Through mock sincerity, the meme frames the NHS and associated UK public health agencies behind COVID-19 guidance as fascist leaders, inviting readers to infer a critical stance beneath the surface-level compliment.

Example 9

Other examples present this historical parallel more subtly by simulating social media endorsement. In Examples 10, the COVID-19 policy post is "liked" by a figure who symbolises the aforementioned ideologies, Josef Goebbels. This relies on the platform affordance of the "like" function as a visual shorthand for support. The irony arises from a semiotic clash between the platform's mechanism of "like" and the extreme ideological implications of the "endorser". By staging this alignment between historical authoritarianism and current institutional communication (i.e., the NHS), the comment realises irony through socio-pragmatic incongruity, amplifying a negative judgement of the institutional legitimacy behind the policy message.
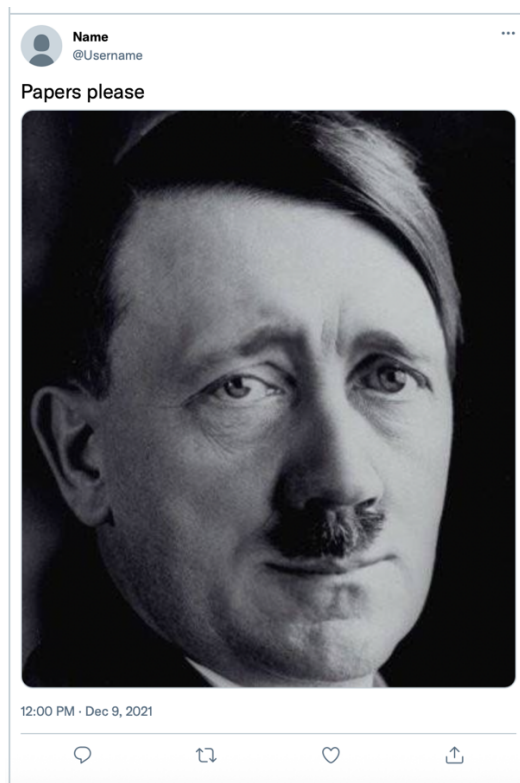
Example 10

In the more implicit cases, commenters invoke multimodal symbolic references associated with the regimes. Examples 11 and 12 use linguistic references to "papers" and a visual depiction of Adolph Hitler to liken COVID Pass to identify checks in Nazi Germany. In particular, Example 11 layers intermodal cues: typographic emphasis and imagined auditory tone (i.e., capitalised commands) evoke coercive speech associated with authoritarian enforcement. The irony arises from the incongruity between the historical frame invoked as its surface meaning and the real-life situation it is intended to evaluate. By applying the semiotics of extreme oppression to a routine public health measure, the comment prompts the audience to re-evaluate the institutional propriety.

Example 11

Example 12

In contrast to these examples alluding historically criticised figures, some comments employ a more subtle strategy through mock praise, referring to authority figures as "heroes" or "angels". In Example 13, the commenter politely requests the NHS to disclose "the truth" about vaccine injuries, ending with "Merry Christmas Angels" and a halo emoji 😇. The comment appears to be sincere at first glance, but the request implies that the NHS is concealing adverse outcomes. The reference to NHS staff as "angels" becomes ironic when set against this implicit critique. This visual cue of the halo emoji, often associates with virtue and care, further intensifies the ironic comparison of NHS staff to angels, possibly drawing on a long-standing media representation of nurses as selfless caring figures (Bridges, 1990), but subtly suggesting they might not be saving lives but instead contributing to patient deaths. Here, irony is achieved through attitudinal incongruity, where the linguistic and visual elements collaboratively construct a veneer of respect that conceals negative evaluation of the veracity and propriety of the NHS in policy communication.

Example 13

Name
@Username

Tell us about the injuries post jab. Tell the truth please.
Merry Christmas Angels. 😇

12:00 PM · Dec 21, 2021

4.3.   Targeting policy supporters

The third target of multimodal irony (20 cases, 12.35%) is the figure of the policy supporters, i.e., those perceived as unquestionably compliant with COVID-19 policy instructions. In this category, irony is employed to undermine the perceived propriety and capacity of such individuals.

This is primarily achieved through visual resources such as emoji and memes as a way of setting up scenarios that implicitly compare policy compliance to irrational or self-destructive behaviours. Such comparisons not only appraise the quality of the policies negatively, but also attribute a lack of judgement to people who follow them. In Example 14, the meme portrays a person placing their head in an oven, accompanied by the explanation, "I received an NHS text saying I needed to do this to keep safe". The meme forms a parallel between policy compliance and self-destructive behaviour, suggesting that adherence to policies stem from blind obedience rather than informed choice.

Example 14

Name
@Username

why stick your head in the oven ?

I recieved an NHS text saying I needed to do this to keep safe..

12:00 PM · Dec 30, 2021
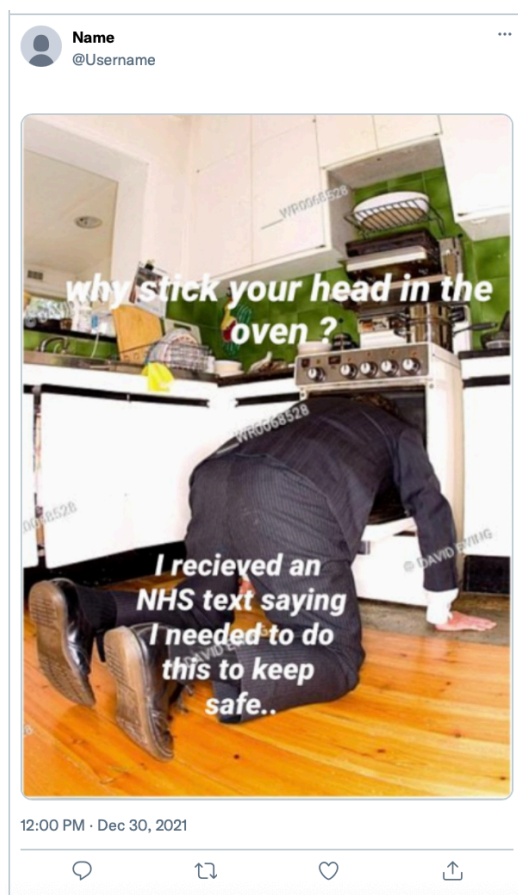
A recurring visual metaphor involves grey-colour stick figures, drawing on the NPC (non-player character) meme format, to index perceived cognitive passivity of policy supporters. The NPC format is rooted in gaming discourse, where non-player characters lack agency, and was appropriated in online right-wing subcultural spaces to depict liberals and leftists as unthinking, programmed subjects who merely reproduce official narratives (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023). In Example 15, an NPC figure is portrayed receiving hundreds of vaccine injections, wearing multiple masks, and sporting a COVID Pass QR code on their forehead. Despite this exaggerated portrayal, the caption, "I hope my government will let me go outside today", invites readers to appraise policy compliance negatively. The contrast between the figure's apparent suffering and their continued compliance creates an implicit critique, portraying policy supporters as unquestioning subjects who endure harm without resistance or critical assessment.

Example 15

Similarly, in Example 16, individuals are portrayed using similar stick figures (e.g., colour, tone, shape) and are all repeating the phrase "vaccines are safe and effective". Their grey-colour, expressionless faces further reinforce the idea of passive repetition and lack of autonomy. This positions policy followers as lacking critical agency (i.e., negative capacity, according to appraisal theory), repeating the NHS vaccination message as an unexamined official line. The recurring use of grey-colour stick figures across the dataset functions as multimodal recontextualisation (van Leeuwen, 2008), where the NPC figure is conventionalised as a semiotic signal indexing policy supporters' uncritical acceptance of excessive control.

Example 16

Another recurrent theme is scapegoating, i.e., the idea that policy supporters deflect responsibility for policy failures onto those refuse to comply. This is illustrated in Example 17, where a woman wearing a mask angrily declares, "My fifth booster didn't work because you didn't get your first". This scenario mocks the logic of attributing vaccination failures to non-compliance, framing it to be illogical. The irony lies in the inner inconsistency of the scenario, where blind policy adherence is paired with misplaced blame.

Example 17

Another noteworthy feature of Example 17 is its cross-modal relationship realising the ironic meaning. Instead of creating incongruence between linguistic and visual elements, the two

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multimodal elements involved are a meme and a 😂 emoji, whose mocking and ridicule nature is also created through elements of "laugh" and "cry".

"Scapegoat" is also visually reinforced through the depiction of goats. In Example 18, a goat character introduces itself as "Omicron the scapegoat", ironically framed as always being blamed for vaccine-related injuries. It suggests the commenter believes that the policy supporters are distracted by the variant rather than holding vaccines responsible for the harms.

Example 18

A related visual metaphor in this group is the "sheep", a biblical and popular cultural reference that suggests mindless following. This metaphor is realised linguistically through terms like 'sheep' or 'sheeple' (Example 20), and visually through the 🐑 emoji (Example 19) or herd imagery (Example 20). The irony rests on an incongruity between the literal representation (sheep who follow the one ahead) and the intended target of evaluation (COVID-19 policy supporters), such that the depiction of herd movement becomes a means of evaluating policy support as unreflective following. In cases where the herd is portrayed moving towards danger (e.g., a slaughterhouse), the mapping further frames policy compliance as leading to harm and death (as in Example 19). Through this comparison, routine acts of policy compliance are reframed as animal-like behaviour devoid of agency or independent judgement. In Example 20, the incongruity is intensified by a tone mismatch between the childlike animation frame (*Shaun the Sheep*) and the critical stance towards policy support. Overall, these comments depict policy supporters as lacking capacity for independent reasoning, and as acting on instinct or collective inertia rather than rational deliberation.

Example 19

Example 20

A prominent strategy across Examples 14, 15, 17 and 20 is the use of mock first-person narration, where commenters adapt the voices of the supposed policy opponents in the scenario (e.g., "my", "I" or "we"). It can be understood as an ironical footing shift (Goffman, 1981), whereby the policy-opposing commenter adopts the voice of a policy supporter to highlight perceived irrationality or lack of reflection. In public health communication, first-person narratives have also been found to be more influential in shaping reader alignment (Nan et al., 2015), which is subverted here to construct and mock blind policy compliance.

5. Discussion

Drawing on a discourse pragmatic perspective, this study examined how multimodal irony is constructed to indirectly express negative stance and evaluation in response to the NHS's COVID-19 policy posts. Through these ironic expressions, commenters reposition themselves not as passive recipients of public health messaging, but as active participants in the discursive negotiation of institutional legitimacy, public responsibility, and policy compliance.

5.1. Multimodal discursive strategies of ironic expression

Across the dataset, we identified five multimodal discursive strategies, each of which contributes to the expression of evaluative stance and to audience positioning within the policy discursive ecosystem.

First, multimodal irony targeting COVID-19 policies typically involved attitudinal incongruity between modes. Visual elements often functioned as equivalents of paralinguistic cues in spoken discourse (Attardo et al., 2003), simulating politeness or affiliative stance, while the linguistic elements conveyed the intended, negative evaluations of the policies' quality, impact or value (see Examples 1 & 5-2). In a smaller subset, linguistic elements articulated seemingly positive sentiments, while the intended critiques were conveyed visually. These include culturally recognisable emoji associated with profanity (Example 2-2) or leisure activities that contrast with the importance of policy compliance (Example 3).

A second strategy involved echoic mimicry of institutional discourse. Commenters reproduced elements of the NHS posts' discursive style, including linguistic phrasing and syntactic structure (Example 4-2), visual design conventions (Example 5-2), as well as

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multimodal branding (Examples 5-2, 6 & 7). Through this strategy, NHS policy guidance is represented as misguided, ineffective or harmful in the comments.

The third strategy involved the use of multimodal allusion to critique the propriety or veracity of authority figures, in which historically oppressive figures and regimes were referenced either linguistically (Examples 9 & 10) or visually (Examples 10 & 12). Commenters also drew on intertextual resources spanning auditory, visual and linguistic modes (Examples 11 & 12), evoking culturally recognisable incidents or iconography associated with these regimes.

The fourth strategy involved the use of multimodal metaphor to target policy supporters. Recurrent visual tropes such as NPC memes (Examples 15 & 16) and sheep imagery (Examples 19 & 20) metaphorically constructed policy supporters as lacking independent judgement or moral discernment (i.e., negative capacity and propriety according to appraisal theory). These were sometimes paired with mock first-person narration (Examples 14, 15, 17 & 20), a form of foot shifting (Goffman, 1981) whereby the commenter temporarily adopts the voice of the mocked figure (i.e., policy supporters) to highlight their perceived irrationality or moral failings.

The final strategy involved the use of multimodal recontextualisation (van Leeuwen, 2008), whereby commenters transformed their responses into other scenarios, including guessing games (Example 8) and historical incidents (Examples 11 & 12). These frame shifts suspended the original comment-post relation, enabling commenters to foreground the intended critique (i.e., the perceived harms of target policy or irrationality of policy compliance) while repositioning themselves as morally justified or authoritative figures (e.g., oppressed individuals in Holocaust references, or game-show hosts), while casting the NHS in culturally delegitimised roles (e.g., authoritarian regimes). Through such recontextualisation, users reframe the power dynamics of digitally mediated policy discourse – a point we develop further in Section 5.3.

5.2.   Platform affordances

Twitter/X's platform affordances not only accommodate but actively shape the construction and likely interpretation of multimodal irony. Central to this is the platform's support for multimodal composition, which allows users to integrate diverse semiotic resources, including, but not limited to, text, emoji, images, memes and hyperlinks. This facilitates the integration of multiple modes through which the discursive strategies outlined in the previous section are realised.

A second affordance is *Twitter/X*'s textual brevity. The 280-character limit in place at the time from which the data was sampled potentially encourages the use of non-textual elements to supplement or replace written language in meaning-making. In our data, this constraint resulted in semantically elliptical and pragmatically underspecified utterances (e.g., Example 4-2) or even full reliance on visual attachments (e.g., Examples 5-2, 6, 7 & 8). This brevity is thus likely to have prompted at least some of the commenters to rely on shared semiotic, pragmatic and sociocultural knowledge to convey their intended meanings effectively within such platform constraints (e.g., Examples 2-2 & 3). It also contributes to interpretive ambiguity, a feature that is central to irony's evaluative (Culpeper et al., 2017; Leech, 1983) and interpersonal functions (e.g., group-bonding and social distancing) (Gal, 2019; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020).

The third affordance is *Twitter/X*'s threaded structure, which embeds replies directly beneath the NHS posts. This structure may prompt readers to interpret comments as responses to the specific NHS message above, rather than as standalone comments. This also supports

the production of echoic mention (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), where commenters reference and dissociate from institutional claims. The automatic inclusion of the "@" handle further anchors replies to the target post, reducing the need to restate evaluative targets (e.g., Example 3). In cases of multimodal mimicry (e.g., Examples 4-2 & 5-2), visual and stylistic resemblance enhances the ironic effect without explicit repetition. Together, these affordances facilitate the indirect stance-taking that characterises the ironic expressions we have analysed.

Finally, the identity practices taking place within *Twitter/X* lower the interpersonal risks of performing ironic critique, which is often evaluative and even face-threatening in nature. Like other social media platforms which offer (perceived) anonymity and pseudonymity (Baider, 2020), *Twitter/X* offers comparatively loose identity verification and widespread use of non-identifying display names and profile images. This weak tie between offline and online identities facilitates ironic postings that may be perceived as particularly critical, mocking, or hostile – particularly when aimed at institutional actors like the NHS. In this sense, the platform's affordance of relatively anonymous expression may enable users to engage in stance-taking while minimising the risk of personal reputational damage (Simpson, 2003).

5.3. Positioning through multimodal irony

We argue that the multimodal irony in the comments we analysed, beyond its potentially entertaining value (Leech, 2014), serves as a discursive resource through which users can voice dissatisfaction and challenge the legitimacy of institutional communication. Rather than being passive recipients of public health messaging, such commenters employ irony to position themselves as critical and active evaluators of the digitally mediated policy discourse. This is particularly evident in our data, as reflected in the multimodal recontextualisation of NHS messages, the frame-shifting of policy discourse into gaming formats, the allusive comparisons of institutional figures to repressive authority figures, and the deployment of multimodal metaphors critiquing the capacity of policy supporters (see Section 5.1 for details). The use of multimodal irony thus allows users to reframe the communicative intent of official messages, projecting alternative readings that are grounded in distrust, critique and resistance.

It should be noted, however, that comments responding to NHS policy posts are not, of course, representative of general public opinion at large. One important asymmetry lies between silent supporters and vocal opponents in digital spaces. This imbalance is amplified by the affordances of social media, as content expressing negative sentiment (including ironic comments) has been shown to generate more engagement and to spread more widely (Tsugawa & Ohsaki, 2015; Wang & Lee, 2021) than more positive content. In some cases, this visibility may also be influenced by coordinated dissemination, whether through bots or paid actors – phenomena which are difficult to detect by both automated detection systems (Grimme et al., 2017) and general users (Cai et al., 2022).

The semiotic richness and rhetorical force of multimodal irony make it well positioned to platforms like *Twitter/X*, where algorithmic promotion tends to privilege emotionally charged, visually distinctive, and easily shareable content (Brady et al., 2017; Wang & Lee, 2021). Such posts – perceived as "peer voices" (Cai et al., 2022; Graham et al., 2015; Pavlova & Berkers, 2020) – may therefore gain disproportionate discursive influence. As Dynel (2022) notes, users often show limited concern for the truthfulness of the intertextual materials they reuse (e.g., memes). When irony is used to frame anti-scientific or conspiratorial narratives, as we at times encountered in the data, its persuasive potential may amplify the visibility and possible influence of such discourse, shaping broader audience perceptions and undermining willingness to follow the policies being critiqued. From a public health communication

perspective, this raises important concerns about the consequences (unintended or otherwise) of multimodal, ironic policy-opposing comments, particularly in terms of how these might challenge intended policy framings and complicate institutional efforts to promote policy compliance and trust in the context of unfolding public health crises.

6. Conclusions

This study has examined how multimodal irony is discursively constructed in public responses to the NHS's COVID-19 policy communication on *Twitter/X*, and how platform affordances mediate such expression. Using a discursive pragmatic approach, we addressed three research questions: (1) how do commenters construct multimodal irony to express stance and evaluation in response to NHS COVID-19 policy-related posts? (2) how does *Twitter/X*'s affordances shape such expressions? And (3) how does multimodal irony position the responses within the wider discursive ecosystem of NHS COVID-19 policy communication on *Twitter/X*?

In the sampled data, most multimodal ironic comments opposed the stance of the corresponding NHS posts. Three prominent targets were identified: COVID-19 policy messages, authority figures, and policy supporters. Our analysis identified five recurrent discursive strategies: (1) cross-modal attitudinal incongruity; (2) echoic mimicry of institutional language and visual design; (3) multimodal allusion; (4) metaphorical delegitimation of policy supporters; and (5) frame-shifting through genre recontextualisation. These strategies enabled evaluative distancing and critique while preserving a degree of plausible deniability, as irony allows oppositional meanings to be reframed as humour or exaggeration rather than explicit attack (Culpeper et al., 2017). This highlights irony's function as both a stance-taking and alignment-seeking device.

Methodologically, our study offers an operationalisable framework for identifying and analysing multimodal irony in short-form, platform-mediated discourse. Grounded in pragmatic theory (e.g., Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Culpeper et al., 2017), it is based upon four necessary features of multimodal social media irony: negativity, indirectness, incongruity and multimodality. By integrating Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), the framework captures both evaluative strategies and their targets. It offers a replicable model for analysing irony where meaning-making is realised through the interaction of linguistic, visual, and platform-specific resources.

While the study offers empirical insights, several limitations should be noted. Our dataset was relatively small (162 cases), and was limited to replies to NHS policy posts within a specific temporal and platform context. Given irony's context-dependent nature, its form and uptake are of course likely to differ across platforms, sociopolitical contexts, and so forth. Moreover, our study focused on the production of irony and therefore does not address audience reception or its effects on interpretation or behaviour, which would require complementary (potentially, experimental) methods. Future research could thus extend this work by exploring how multimodal irony circulates and is interpreted across different platforms and publics.

In summary, this study foregrounds multimodal irony as a consequential resource in digital public health discourse. Far from being merely humorous or peripheral, ironic comments actively shape how institutional messages are responded and reinterpreted on digital platforms. As such, multimodal irony warrants closer analytical attention – not only for what it reveals about dissent and resistance, but also for how it contributes to potentially reframing the communicative dynamics of digital public health messaging during crises and beyond.

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