A linguistic analysis of Pre- and During-COVID representations of fuel poverty in the UK newspaper press

	fuel poverty	
The winter appeal is, quite simply, a lifesaver.""</s><s>The charity said	**fuel poverty**	is responsible for winter deaths, social isolation and respiratory pr
hat 300 elderly and vulnerable people in Wiltshire and Swindon living in	**fuel poverty**	received £300 grants.</s><s>Wadworth's commercial director, Jo
old-related illness.</s><s>The South West has the UK's highest rate of	**fuel poverty**	- those who cannot afford to spend the average amount needed to
gion the National Office of Statistics says 11.4 per cent of homes live in	**fuel poverty**	.</s><s>But the same statistics say that there are pockets of Wilts
hange the minimum top-up, added: 'This has revealed the extent of the	**fuel poverty**	crisis in Britain today, with far too many struggling to find even £5
's lead.</s><s>There is much more that needs to be done to tackle the	**fuel poverty**	crisis and I will continue to campaign for those who are struggling
ient buildings, care homes and commercial entities and to help address	**fuel poverty**	and reduce carbon emissions.</s><s>""Twenty years ago there w
rs, especially those living in social housing and facing the challenges of	**fuel poverty**	, the eradicating of which the Scottish government says is ""cruci

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Rationale

This study conducted research on how fuel poverty was represented in the UK newspaper press across the winter immediately before Covid (2019-20) and the first winter during Covid (2020-21). Although there is ample scholarship on media representations of general conceptions of poverty, there is no existing research on representations of fuel poverty in the UK as a distinct form of inequality and an unacceptable feature of contemporary 21st century living (Boardman, 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2007). Therefore, this study was designed to be the first dedicated treatment of UK newspaper discourses of fuel poverty, specifically across pre- and during-Covid winters. The news media performs ideological functions in society, including shaping perceptions of social issues, and it can be used by policymakers and politicians as a proxy for public opinion (O'Sullivan et al., 2012: 58). Therefore, exploring the language of fuel poverty in British newspapers is both important and timely.

Research aims

The aims of this project were to:

1. create FuelPovertyPressUK, a dataset of UK newspaper coverage of fuel poverty;
2. explore whether public representations of fuel poverty in the UK press have changed between the winter immediately before Covid (2019-20) and the first winter during Covid (2020-21);
3. determine whether the social groups that are reported as being affected by fuel poverty have shifted during this timeframe;
4. understand how the fuel poor's agency or responsibility are represented;
5. generate initial insights into how newspaper reporting of fuel poverty intersects with reporting of food poverty.

Summary of research activity

This project created FuelPovertyPressUK, a dataset of UK newspaper press coverage of fuel poverty. FuelPovertyPressUK is a corpus (a large body of electronically stored language data), totalling ~500,000 words across 710 articles, which span regional and national newspapers. To respond to possible changes in the representation of fuel poverty over time, FuelPovertyPressUK comprises two smaller corpora, a "Pre-Covid Winter Corpus" spanning September 2019 – March 2020 and a "During-Covid Winter Corpus" spanning September 2020 - March 2021. To ensure the articles in FuelPovertyPressUK are relevant discussions of fuel poverty, all articles included in the corpus contain at least two mentions of the following terms: *fuel poverty*, *fuel poor*, *energy poverty*, *energy poor*, *utility bill(s)*, *gas bill(s)*, *electricity bill(s)*. FuelPovertyPressUK is freely available in plain text format for fuel poverty researchers at: https://www.fuelpovertyresearch.net/.

Table 1: FuelPovertyPressUK composition

Corpus	Number of articles	Number of words
Pre-Covid Winter Corpus (2019-2020)	293	240,596
During-Covid Winter Corpus (2020-2021)	417	258,966
Total for FuelPovertyPressUK	710	499,562

Methodology

The analysis of FuelPovertyPressUK used a **corpus linguistic approach to analysing discourse**. This is an extremely well-established approach in linguistics for studying how socially significant issues and social groups are represented in public spheres, such as the news media (Baker and McEnery, 2005; Baker, 2006). Corpus linguistics is a mixed-methods approach that uses computational software to examine large amounts of electronically stored linguistic data in the form of corpora and identify salient, as well as non-obvious, patterns in language use. **It uses quantitative measures that provide a map of language patterns that can then be analysed and interpreted qualitatively**. Keyword analysis, a corpus linguistic tool that identifies language that is characteristic of a dataset, was used to give an insight into the dominant themes of the Pre-Covid and During-Covid datasets, which were then compared. Corpus tools were also used to analyse close linguistic relationships (known as collocations) between terms of interest in the datasets, including *household*(s) and *people*. This study used the corpus linguistic programme SketchEngine to carry out the analysis. To analyse the representation of the fuel poor's agency or responsibility, this study drew on principles of transitivity, which is a model of grammar for identifying "entities in the world and the ways in which those entities act on or relate to one another"; in other words, who did what to whom (Thompson, 2004: 86).

Findings

Trends in newspaper reporting on fuel poverty Pre- and During-Covid

Although the Pre-Covid and During-Covid datasets are similarly sized, there was a 42% increase in the number of articles reporting on fuel poverty from winter 2019-2020 (293) to winter 2020-2021 (417). In both datasets, **there was a greater proportion of articles from regional newspapers than national ones** (Figure 1). The increase in reporting in the overall frequency of articles in the During-Covid corpus primarily comes from regional newspapers (up from 202 to 314 articles).

The number of newspapers reporting on fuel poverty also increased During-Covid. This rose from 22 to 25 national newspapers and from 98 to 123 regional newspapers. These trends in reporting across time suggests **fuel poverty maintained a similar level of national newsworthiness in the UK across the winters of 2019-20 and 2020-21.** However, an increase in different regional newspapers reporting on fuel poverty and the total regional articles suggests **fuel poverty became an increasingly significant and pervasive regionalised or localised social issue over the time period covered.** Table 2 shows that national newspaper coverage was relatively stable across political leanings over time.
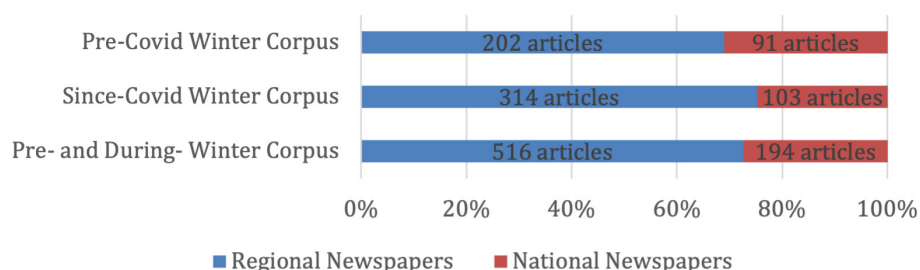
Pre-Covid Winter Corpus	202 articles	91 articles
Since-Covid Winter Corpus	314 articles	103 articles
Pre- and During- Winter Corpus	516 articles	194 articles

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

■ Regional Newspapers   ■ National Newspapers

Figure 1: Composition of FuelPovertyPressUK by newspaper reach

Table 2. Political leaning of national newspapers in FuelPovertyPressUK

	Pre-Covid Winter Corpus National Newspapers	During-Covid Winter Corpus National Newspapers
Left wing	44 (48.4%)	53 (51.45%)
Neutral	1 (1.1%)	2 (1.95%)
Right wing	46 (50.5%)	48 (46.6%)
Total:	91	103

Shifts in dominant themes in fuel poverty reporting

There were 8 main themes in the linguistic characteristics of FuelPovertyPressUK: Environmental/Green Issues; Residence; Money; People; Groups (Companies/Organisations); Government and Politics; Covid; Geographical Names. Whilst all 8 themes appeared in both datasets, there were four important differences between Pre- and During-Covid data:

■ **Government and Politics was a more salient issue in fuel poverty Pre-Covid.** This may be because the Pre-Covid data covered the UK 2019 general election. However, the lack of political parties and politicians in the During-Covid keywords (see below) suggests fuel poverty was reported in a much less politicised way in winter 2020-2021 than in 2019-2020.

Government and politics	Pre-Covid Keywords	During-Covid Keywords
Politics: Political parties	Tories, SNP, Tory, Dems, Lib, Scottish, Fein	SNP

■ **A shift of focus from the macro-economic conditions of fuel poverty to the more human, personal ones**. This was suggested in the theme of Money, where Pre-Covid there was a focus on commerce and economics (e.g. *FTSE*, *RPI*) and During-Covid there was a focus on individual payment and affordability (e.g. *energy bill*, *voucher*).

Money	Pre-Covid Keywords	During-Covid Keywords
Money: Payment	prepayment, payzone	prepayment, pre-payment, energy (bill), (energy) bill, voucher
Money: Commerce / Economics	Euro, CPIH, RPI, FTSE	

■ **A greater focus on fuel poverty solutions During-Covid than Pre-Covid.** Both Environmental/Green Issues and Residence themes are more present in the 2020-2021 winter, including discussion of climate change (*net-zero*, *decarbonise*) and improving the energy efficiency of the housing stock (*retrofit*, *EPC*).

Environmental / Green Issues	Pre-Covid Keywords	During-Covid Keywords
	decarbonisation, wind	net-zero, decarbonise, decarbonisation, community-owned, COP26, energy (renewable)
Residence		
Energy-related	Passivhaus, A-rated, energy-save, insulation	insulation, EPC, retrofitting, retrofit, energy-efficient, energy-efficiency, Passivhaus, homes

Further research into these themes is needed but these initial observations align with findings of existing scholarship. That scholarship points out that by focussing on the poor themselves, their experiences and behaviours when reporting on poverty, **the UK media can draw attention away from wider structural deficiencies and inequalities that may contribute to or cause poverty**, including governmental responsibility and national economic issues (Paterson, 2020; Harkins and Lugo-Ocando, 2016). Likewise, the increased saliency of Environmental and Residential themes During-Covid **focusses solutions to fuel poverty on homes themselves (their energy efficiency) which can have the effect of detracting from the other main drivers of fuel poverty**, including low incomes and high fuel bills/energy prices (high living costs) (Boardman, 2010; Middlemiss, 2017).

■ **More diverse social groups reported as experiencing fuel poverty During-Covid.** This is indicated by a broadening of the keywords in the theme of People, for instance, from *renter* and words related to *pensioner*, towards the more inclusive *householder*. This is discussed in more detail below.

People	Pre-Covid Keywords	During-Covid Keywords
General	Briton, household, renter	household, householder, terminally
Pensioners	pensioners, frail, over-75, tax-free	pensioners

Changes in the social groups affected by fuel poverty

In the Pre-Covid data, fuel poverty is reported as primarily affecting rural households, low-income households, and older people, especially the latter. This finding aligns with previous research on representations of (general) poverty and inequalities in the British press which observes that fuel poverty is often presented as a problem unique to elderly and pensioner households (Chauhan and Foster, 2014; Harkins and Lugo-Ocando, 2016). In the During-data, Covid has exacerbated conditions for existing *fuel poor* and *vulnerable* households (Burlinson et al., 2021). Fuel poverty reporting During-Covid also **affects a greater number of people and a broader scope of social groups**, including the *terminally-ill*, the *young*, *families*, and those pulled into fuel poverty *for the first time*. This pattern in reporting mirrors actual fuel poverty statistics during Covid winters, particularly that the fuel poor expanded and diversified, along with the creation of the 'new fuel poor' (Ambrose et al., 2021; Burlinson et al., 2021).

Fuel poverty **broadening from affecting only specific social groups towards being a more pervasive social issue** is illustrated in Figure 2. This shows the relative frequency of references to different social groups across time. The decrease in occurrences of those social groups positioned as uniquely affected by fuel poverty Pre-Covid (*pensioner**, *elderly*, and *renter**) coincides with an increase of references to broader and other social groups (*household**, *famil**, and *child**) During-Covid.
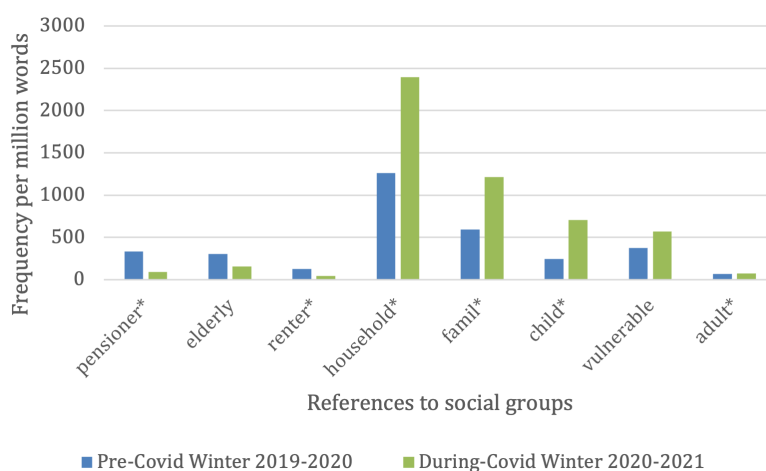
Figure 2. References to social groups across time in FuelPovertyPressUK (normalised per million words)

The fuel poor have little agency and are deserving of support

Overall, the fuel poor or those at risk of becoming fuel poor are positioned as agentless in their experiences of fuel poverty. **Being or becoming fuel poor is typically represented as a passive or involuntary process** (something people *fall* or *slip* into). Fuel poverty is externally enforced upon them; it is beyond their own control, responsibility or behaviours (they are *pushed*, *forced*, or *plunged* into it). Who or what initiates these processes (i.e. does the *pushing*) is often vague or omitted. The fuel poor are also presented as intended and actual recipients of positive social processes, including *help*, *support*, and *protect*. Therefore, they are **overwhelmingly positioned as deserving of support from organisations in the sector that are capable of providing direct assistance, including the government, charities, and energy suppliers themselves.** This preliminary finding runs counter to some research on UK media reporting of general poverty and public responses to it, where the poor and benefit recipients are often demonised, negatively represented as undeserving of support because of individual failings, and 'othered', meaning treated as different or stereotyped as deviant from other groups in society (Paterson et al., 2017; Paterson, 2020; Chase and Walker, 2014; Chauhan and Foster, 2014; Jensen, 2014). Instead, the fuel poor here are blameless and not readily stigmatised, **mirroring findings on UK media coverage of the food poor who are more sympathetically represented** (Knight et al., 2018). Examples of the actions that *people* in the data perform (in green) and the actions that happen to/affect them (in pink) are given in Figure 3 below.

Intersections with different forms of poverty

In the Pre-Covid data, *poverty* frequently occurs next to *fuel, extreme, energy,* and *food.* During-Covid, it occurs next to the above, as well as *child* and *mass*. The During-Covid data contains a new category of keywords in the Money theme relating to food poverty (*foodbank*, *Rashford*, and *cooker*) which does not appear in the Pre-Covid corpus, **meaning that food poverty is a more salient theme in fuel poverty newspaper reporting in winter 2020-21 than in winter 2019-2020**. *foodbank/food bank* occurs almost twice as frequently During-Covid than Pre-Covid. This suggests that **UK newspaper press reporting increasingly recognised the impact of general financial hardship and brought the realities of experiencing different forms of poverty into focus**, including making choices between necessities (Burlinson et al, 2021; Lambie-Mumford and Snell, 2015), especially between 'heating or eating':

> It is feared that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will mean more people than ever before having to make a ' heat or eat ' choice (Keighley News, November 2020)

visualization by SKETCH ENGINE

Figure 3. Verbs patterning with people in FuelPovertyPressUK

This finding corresponds with that of a parallel food poverty project where *fuel occurs* 2.5 times more frequently and *energy occurs* 8 times more frequently in UK newspaper reports on food poverty Since-Covid (March 2020 – August 2022) than Pre-Covid (August 2017–March 2020) (Harrington et al., in prep.).

Recommendations

Following the findings of this project, we suggest the below considerations for fuel poverty charities, campaigners, and advocates, such as National Energy Action and Fuel Bank Foundation, when designing fuel poverty public communication:

- **Strategically target both regional and national outlets for representation of fuel poverty** – ensuring fuel povertsy is not just perceived as a localised issue.
- **Promote accurate representations of the diversity of people experiencing fuel poverty in the UK** - limiting the preconceptions that fuel poverty is unique to specific social groups which may cause social stigma and feelings of shame.
- **Continue to frame fuel poverty as unacceptable and shocking** - mobilising national support for change, and ensuring that mass coverage of fuel poverty does not normalise it as an unproblematic, unchallengeable condition in contemporary British society.

Directions for future research:

- A more detailed analysis of the agency and responsibility of actors involved in fuel poverty other than the fuel poor, including the government, energy suppliers, and Ofgem.
- An analysis of UK newspaper coverage in subsequent winters of 2021-2022 and 2022-23, following national and global economic events, including the cost-of-living crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Parallel studies of fuel poverty reporting in other countries and languages for international comparisons.

Outputs

1. FuelPovertyPressUK, an open access dataset of UK newspaper press coverage of fuel poverty, available at https://www.fuelpovertyresearch.net/

2. Journal Article submitted to *Journal of Corpus Linguistics*

   Plunged into fuel poverty: Fuel poverty and the fuel poor in UK newspapers in the winters of 2019-20 and 2020-21

   Fuel poverty, a household's inability to achieve healthy, thermal comfort in line with a healthy standard of living at a reasonable cost (Boardman, 1991), attracted increased public attention in the UK during the 2020-21 winter lockdowns. Drawing on FuelPovertyPressUK, a specialised corpus of UK newspaper coverage of fuel poverty, this paper is the first treatment of the discursive representation of fuel poverty in the public sphere as a distinct form of social-economic inequality (Boardman, 2010). The paper conducts a diachronic corpus-assisted discourse analysis, comparing Pre-Covid Winter (September 2019–March 2020) and During-Covid Winter (September 2020-March 2021) subcorpora. The findings highlight newspaper reporting seeming to adequately reflect the increasing heterogeneity of the fuel poor across Covid and that the fuel poor are ultimately positioned as agentless. The paper points to the important ideological role that newspaper representations of the fuel poor can have in shaping public opinion and common-sense attitudes towards poverty.

3. Findings from this project are being paired with a parallel project on representations of food poverty (funded by the Aston Institute for Forensic Linguistics) to form the basis of an ESRC New Investigators Grant on public discourses of poverty and destitution (expected submission, Summer 2024).

4. Article to be submitted to *The Conversation*, titled: *Reporting on fuel poverty in modern Britain – why language matters*.

Acknowledgements

Other information

The FuelPovertyPressUK Corpus is freely available in plain text format at: https://www.fuelpovertyresearch.net/. For more information, please contact Dr Leigh Harrington (email: leigh.harrington@manchester.ac.uk).

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