



The Affects of Racist Discourse: British Media's Scapegoating of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Groups in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Through a case study of the news media narrative surrounding British Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups published by the Daily Mail during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article analyzes the affects of news media discourse to better understand how and why racial scapegoating and racist ideologies abound in times of public (health) crises. By conducting a critical discourse analysis, this article finds that although BAME individuals were initially presented as heroic healthcare workers in the first few weeks of COVID lockdown, the Daily Mail soon presented them as inexplicable sources of contagion, turning them into public scapegoats for the spread of the virus. Drawing on historical racial tropes of poverty, ill-health and poor living-conditions, the Daily Mail articles simultaneously suggested BAME individuals were biologically inferior to white Brits, and increasingly implied they were personally responsible for their disproportionate COVID suffering. This discourse thus generated emotions of fear, uncertainty, and aversion towards a fictional group of homogenous, non-white individuals, who were presented as a source of contagion and a threat to the health of the white British nation. By scapegoating BAME individuals for the spread of COVID-19, the Daily Mail denied that historic, systemic racism was responsible for COVID-related racial health inequities, and instead succeeded at sustaining the popular imaginary of the UK as a tolerant nation, free of racism.

Keywords: BAME; COVID; news media; racial scapegoating; discourse; affect

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On March 23rd, 2020, almost two months after the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the U.K., former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced that British residents would be entering a stage of lockdown for the foreseeable future. The lockdown was intended to curb the spread of the virus and prevent the National Health Service (NHS) from becoming overwhelmed with patients. Soon after, as the pandemic worsened, and hospitals overflowed with COVID-19 patients, NHS workers were lauded as heroes, with British residents partaking in weekly curbside public demonstrations of appreciation for the heroic pandemic workers. However, as further research on the virus, patient symptoms, and patient demographics emerged, British news media outlets soon began reporting on the disproportionate suffering of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) healthcare workers from the virus; not only were more BAME NHS workers catching the virus than white British medical staff, but they were also suffering worse symptoms and were more likely to die from the virus. Similar news headlines were published shortly after this initial discovery, detailing the increased rates of COVID-19 infection in BAME communities beyond the healthcare sector and among the general public. Soon, high rates of COVID-19 infection rates within the UK became associated with BAME communities, and race became a salient category for understanding the spread of the virus. This became especially evident on June 4th, only two and a half months after the declared lockdown, when 'The Daily Mail' news outlet published an article headlined 'BAME people may face higher risk of dying from coronavirus because of their higher rates of vitamin D deficiencies, scientist says'.

This article explores how and why COVID-19 infection rates, and the causes and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, became very publicly connected to biological race. In lieu of conducting retroactive ethnographic inquiry to explore this phenomenon, I analyze the news media coverage published during the first six months of the pandemic, understanding news media as a form of public discourse and as a construction and representation of social reality that mirrors and reproduces the dominant ideologies within British society during a given period (van Dijk, 1988). By critically analyzing the content and discourse used by the British media outlet, 'The Daily Mail', in the first six months of the pandemic, I track the evolving narrative surrounding British Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups and the COVID-19 virus, to answer the following questions: 1) How were BAME individuals presented in COVID-19 news media coverage at the beginning of the pandemic, and how did this narrative evolve in response to emerging research and knowledge of disproportionate suffering, government mandates/actions, and other socio-political events?; and 2) How can this evolving narrative help us understand what is deemed 'sayable' about the socio-political positions, representations, and subjectivities of BAME communities and individuals within the UK?

My research shows how the mediatized representations of ethnic minority individuals shifted dramatically in the first six months of the pandemic, from being presented as heroic healthcare workers, to then being seen as inexplicable sources of contagion, to finally becoming public scapegoats for the spread of COVID-19. I find that the Daily Mail drew on colonial-inspired tropes, that are deeply embedded in 21st century British conceptions of race and bodily health, to effectively scapegoat BAME communities, while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the role that these racial ideologies have on causing the very conditions that lead to racial health inequities. Ultimately, I make a case for analyzing the affective potential of news media and public discourse as a way to better understand how and why racist ideologies abound in times of public (health) crisis. To make my argument, I turn first to reviewing scholarship on the role that news media plays in shaping discourse, and I provide a brief history of racial scapegoating. Next, I present my own

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research methodology in relation to these bodies of previous research, before then beginning my chronological analysis of Daily Mail articles to trace the shift in discourse throughout the first six months of the pandemic. I conclude with considerations about the affective impact of cumulative discourses, and reflect on what the Daily Mail discourse can tell us about the affects of racist ideologies within the U.K.

1 Discourse in News Media

Critical discourse analysis acknowledges how the subjects and objects of knowledge and ‘truth’ are constituted through language that is produced by (scientific and educational) institutions and information-disseminating apparatuses, such as media outlets (Foucault, 2010). With this in mind, I therefore turn to critical discourse analysis to examine the role that news media outlets, and their textual outputs, play in perpetuating and normalizing discourses that reflect and reproduce widely accepted notions of race (van Dijk, 1991). Historically, it was believed that legacy news media, while successful in determining which issues gained public attention, had very little impact on individuals’ opinions surrounding these topics (Curtice and Semetko, 1994; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). More recently, however, media discourse has been acknowledged as one of the most important influencers of public attitudes (Hargreaves, 2003; Lloyd, 2004). The ubiquity of mass media, the consonance and ideological homogeneity of news coverage, and the cumulative nature of news narratives are all thought to affect people’s perceptions of public opinion on salient topics (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) – including race-related events.

However, it is worth noting that the influential power existent between news media discourse and public opinion flows both ways; just as the ideologies of media mogul elites and their subsequent news coverage can shape social perspectives, public opinion can also drive news media narratives. (Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo, 2002). In fact, the capital attached to the news media industry means that news discourses are constantly shaped by a multitude of factors, not just the social and po-

litical ideologies of writers, editors, and publishers. For instance, the ‘newsworthiness’ of topics is influenced by the news outlet’s staff, the coverage of competing outlets, the historical trajectory and political agenda of the outlet, and the expectations of the outlet’s established audiences (Galtung and Holmboe Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O’Neill, 2001; Harcup and O’Neill, 2017). This final factor is particularly instrumental in shaping the tone of the Daily Mail’s narratives, as selective exposure theory and confirmation bias would suggest that individuals don’t just expect to see certain types of narratives and news content, but actually gravitate towards and consistently select content that reinforces and confirms their pre-existing belief systems (Stroud, 2008). The Daily Mail, in its effort to maintain a sustained readership, thus complies to the expectations of its consistent target audience, creating a feedback loop of ever-escalating supply, demand and consumption of particular discourses and storytelling styles that appeal to a sub-stratum of the British population – typically white, politically right-leaning, conservative individuals (Lownie, 2023).

Analyzing news media discourse thus provides insight into how racial knowledge is produced, and reified, by news outlets. It allows us to illuminate the often-hidden racial assumptions that have permeated British society and have become unquestionable ‘truths’, while also enabling us to see how the British press contributes to the continuity of these racist ideologies (Hall, 2021; van Dijk, 1991). By critically analyzing news media discourse, it is possible to see how social power relations are imbued and constituted through news media language and articles. Moreover, by departing from traditional methods of discourse analysis, which typically avoid considering the emotional experiences that can occur when readers engage with particular discourses, this article also makes space for examining the affective and emotional potential embedded in the discourse of news media articles.

My approach to understanding affect and emotion within written news media is inspired by Berg, von Scheve, Ural and Walter-Jochum (2019), who propose a theoretical and methodological turn towards understanding the ‘intertwinement of emotion, language and discourse’ (46). In

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this line of inquiry, they are inspired by affect theorist, Sara Ahmed (2004), who understands the emotionality of discourse as a tool that affects bodies, by aligning groups of people against one another – a central tenet of race relations and tensions. This article thus begins from the premise that affect, emotions, and discourse are intertwined, and that this entanglement has consequences on how bodies relate to one another on a personal and societal level. From an analytical perspective, I therefore consider affect to be a hermeneutic lens that aids in conceptualizing the causes and impacts of discourse and language choice. To accomplish this, I adopt the framework of ‘reading for affect’ while conducting critical discourse analysis throughout this article. This involves attuning myself to the emotionality of discourse and the affective potential of language, by considering how emotion-laden language is attributed to specific actors and ideas, and how social collectives are linguistically connected to their bodily qualities (Berg, von Scheve, Ural and Walter-Jochum (2019)). With this in mind, it is worth noting that I use the terms affect and emotion interchangeably throughout this article, understanding them both as inextricably entwined and impossible to disentangle from one another (Ahmed, 2004).

2 Racial Scapegoating

One pertinent way in which we see evidence of emotion interacting with discourse, is in the history of racial scapegoating during times of widespread uncertainty and panic – such as pandemics and endemics. The early-20th century outbreak of bubonic plague in San Francisco’s Chinatown, for example, has prompted a wealth of analysis into the historical racial violence and scapegoating of America’s Asian population during times of health crises (Craddock, 2000; Risse, 2012). Similarly, other scholars have argued that the scapegoating of Black populations during the HIV/Aids epidemic and the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia was not only fueled by racism but has also contributed to the proliferation of incorrect assumptions that innate biological differences exist between races (Hogarth, 2017; Kiple and Kiple, 1980; Markel, 2005). These historical analyses lay the groundwork for contemporary

explorations into present-day public health crises as moments of racial tension and increased racial scapegoating. Most importantly, they also pave the way for examining the role that emotions (such as fear, anxiety, uncertainty, hope etc.) play in shaping prevalent discourses. In doing so, these analyses delineate how public discourses, such as news media narratives, can mutate emotions and affects; they delineate how emotions that originally occur in response to invisible, intangible threats such as viruses, quickly become displaced onto the bodies of foreigners and outsiders.

With regards to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, research conducted thus far into racial scapegoating typically focuses on America's South-East Asian population (see Nakayama, 2020; and Walker and Daniel Anders, 2021), prompted in part by the racial tensions fueled by former President Donald Trump's anti-Asian stance and 'Kung-flu' discourse. Mallapragada (2021), for instance, makes the case for understanding the increase in racial violence towards Asian Americans as a repetition of historical patterns that reify the cultural production of Asians as carriers of such contagion. Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs (2021), meanwhile, argue that anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 crisis was primarily undergirded by white Christian nationalism. They also state that Americans who harbor white Christian nationalist ideologies are more likely to blame minorities for their own disproportionate infection rates – regardless of ethnicity. Although more recent research takes into account the European context (Levina, 2022, for example), most of the research on COVID and race has been carried out with a distinctly American lens (see Altschuler and Wald, 2021; Calvente, 2021; Cerdana, 2020; Curry, 2021; Hardy, 2020; Perry et al., 2020). This article therefore intends to supplement this existing body of research by offering a perspective on the British racial and cultural landscape, in a way that acknowledges the distinctly different racial makeup, racial tensions, public attitudes, and media environment existent in the U.K.

3 Method

To delineate how racialized attitudes concerning COVID-19 came into being within the U.K., I carried out a critical discourse analysis of the language used in 60 articles published by The Daily Mail online between April 11th and July 31st, 2020. The Daily Mail is widely-perceived as a right-leaning British news outlet that has historically attracted a largely Conservative audience, and it continues to be the only national newspaper whose readership is more likely to vote for the Conservative Party than the Labor Party (Lownie, 2023). At the beginning of the pandemic, the Daily Mail was the most visited media outlet in the UK (Muck Rack, 2021), and the Daily Mail and General Trust (company owner of dailymail.co.uk) had control over 27 per cent of the British wholesale market. In March 2020, the Daily Mail website (dailymail.co.uk) had an average monthly reach of over 36.2 million adults (Watson for Statista, 2022), with 17 per cent of people within the U.K. using the Daily Mail website or app to read headlines and stay up to date on current news (Ofcom Report, 2020). To better understand the outreach of the Daily Mail, it is worth noting that at the beginning of the pandemic, 70 per cent more people turned to the Daily Mail to stay abreast of political news than who turned to their largest British news media outlet competitor, ‘The Sun’, or even Twitter and Google (Ofcom Report, 2020). This figure is unsurprising considering that, for several years now, the Daily Mail website has remained within the top five news websites visited worldwide – the only privately owned British website to have gained such global notoriety (Majid for Press Gazette, 2022). In an extremely diversified media market such as the U.K.’s, with its rich history of well-established media outlets such as the ‘BBC’, and ‘The Guardian’, these figures should not be underestimated. The language used within these Daily Mail articles has a huge exposure level, and the potential to be impacting and reflecting the attitudes of millions of British readers. Moreover, the outlet’s notoriety and the competitive British media market means that the Daily Mail contributes to setting the national news agenda, and is influencing what ideas can, cannot, and should be shared across multiple news outlets (see McCombs and Shaw, 1972; and Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo, 2002, for more on agen-

da-setting theory).

Considering the increased reliance on digital technologies during the government-mandated lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic in the U.K., the popularity of the Daily Mail news outlet, and the ease of accessibility, articles were selected for analysis only from the Daily Mail website that were published within the first six months of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Articles were found for analysis through the search function on the Daily Mail website and were selected if they contained any reference to both COVID-19, and ethnic minority groups. Iterations of the search word 'COVID-19' included 'coronavirus', 'virus', 'COVID', 'COVID-19' and 'pandemic', and iterations of 'ethnic minority groups' included 'BAME', 'Black', 'Asian', 'Ethnic minority' and 'minority'. All possible combinations of these keywords were inputted into the online search function to render as many relevant results as possible. I selected all article results that were yielded through these keyword searches, with the exception of articles that were written by the 'Associated Press' rather than Daily Mail journalists, and any articles that were tagged as belonging to the sports section of the website. This rendered a total of 60 Daily Mail articles published between April 11th and July 31st. Using the qualitative analysis software tool, NVivo, I carried out a word frequency analysis, and used this as a starting point to inductively code for content, discursive themes, and patterns that re-emerged throughout these 60 articles. The coding process was incredibly iterative in nature, with the number of codes and the types of categories changing as the analysis developed. At the end of the process, I rendered a total of 14 codes that indicated recurring thematic content throughout the articles, including topics such as 'religion', 'financial impacts', 'unlawfulness', 'living situation', 'disproportionate death', and 'underlying health conditions'. Using these codes, I then conducted a close reading and critical discourse analysis of the relevant article excerpts.

4 Limitations

As this paper admittedly only uses a small sample of articles published by one news outlet within a limited time frame, future research in this area would benefit from taking a larger sample size with more longitudinal analysis to track the evolving and competing narratives. That being said, with regards to the concentrated sample size, it is worth noting that the aim of this article is not to criticize the Daily Mail in particular, nor to make the claim that it is a racist news media outlet. Rather, my hope is that this article contributes a much-needed detailed study on the content and discourse of a major British newspaper (van Dijk, 1991) that acts as a demonstrative case study for uncovering the socio-cultural role of the British media press at large.

5 Results

5.1 The Heroic BAME Healthcare Worker

In the very early days of the global COVID-19 pandemic, governments and scientific research teams around the world were scrambling to find out as much as possible about the new virus. Troves of healthcare professionals working in the NHS COVID wards had little access to adequate personal protective equipment and were catching the virus with severe symptoms. At this early stage in the pandemic, the topic of racial health disparities in relation to the COVID-19 virus had not yet become an issue for concern. In fact, it didn't surface in the British media until April 11th, 2020, when it was made public that the first ten doctors to have died from COVID-19 in the U.K. were from BAME communities. In a workforce in which 22.1 per cent of all staff members are from BAME backgrounds, with an even higher percentage of non-white, non-medical staff (Gov.UK, 2021), it is of little surprise that the death of BAME healthcare professionals quickly became a prevalent topic in the news media. By mid-April, the Daily Mail began publishing articles, on average once every two days from April 20th until May 22nd, that either

headlined, or repeatedly emphasized, the disproportionate suffering of BAME groups from the virus. Articles published on April 27th, April 30th, and May 7th, for example, all state that ‘doctors have come from other parts of the world to provide vital care and save other people’s lives in our health service, and now they have sadly paid the ultimate sacrifice’. Similarly, on May 7th, an article described BAME doctors as ‘serving the nation as we fight the virus’, and the journalist implores the NHS to ‘deploy’ BAME nurses ‘away from the front line’.

In the early fight against COVID-19, all healthcare workers, regardless of ethnicity or skin colour, thus became the heroes in the country’s fight against the virus, and the racially disproportionate deaths were presented as a tragic, but inevitable, part of the battle against COVID-19. By adopting tropes of sacrifice, heroism, warfare and battlefields, the Daily Mail contributed to the creation of a national discursive agenda that glorified the difficulties of the healthcare industry and martyred the dying doctors and nurses. This practice of equating the duties of healthcare professionals with soldiers has historical precedent in previous periods of intense contagion and crisis (Walker, 2020), and has been so widely adopted by media outlets and government officials alike, precisely because of its emotional impact. In a similar way to World War Two propaganda, this discursive media agenda evoked nationalist wartime spirit and rallied British citizens into comradeship (Benziman, 2020; Johnstone and McLeish, 2020). Through discourse that conjures ‘past histories of association’ to times of national and personal uncertainty, fear becomes the emotion that is produced discursively to ‘align bodies with and against others’ (Ahmed, 2004: 72). In this process, an ‘us’ was created that united a nation against common external enemies.

On the one hand, the almost-invisible coronavirus thus became reconceptualized as a tangible enemy that needed to be fought on two fronts – in the COVID wards by healthcare heroes, and on the home front, by everyday people. Yet, on the other hand, everyone external to the national other (such as the incoming foreign tourist whose entry into the U.K. signified potential contagion) also became a frightening threat. So, while this early discourse of sacrifice and heroism may initially be

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interpreted as supporting and glorifying BAME healthcare workers, it also began the process of ‘othering’ everyone who did not belong to the collective, national ‘us’ – an ‘us’ who has always been imagined as consisting of white Brits (van Dijk, 1991). These early articles thus primed readers to conceive of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to an us/them dichotomy, and to begin othering the non-white Brit. Evidence of this can be seen in the way that these early articles draw particular attention to the deaths of the immigrant BAME doctors (rather than British-born BAME healthcare workers) and explicitly offer details on their places of birth and their immigration stories. By emphasizing these details, the reader is reminded that while these non-white healthcare workers may be sacrificing their lives for British citizens and ‘fighting’ on the right side *with* the nation against the virus, these foreign doctors do not truly *belong* to the national ‘us’.

5.2 The Biologically and Socially Inferior Non-White Body

The distinction between the (white) Brit and the foreigner that the Daily Mail promoted in the first few weeks of the pandemic was exacerbated once NHS England published a report on April 21st, 2020. The report not only detailed the disproportionate infection rates among BAME healthcare workers, but also BAME communities. After the Daily Mail reported on the findings of this report, mentions of the heroic sacrifices of BAME doctors and nurses slowly faded from articles, and by May 8th, 2020, they had disappeared entirely. Instead, the Daily Mail began offering explanations for *why* BAME individuals were more severely impacted by the virus than their white British counterparts. The prevalence of underlying health conditions, or ‘comorbidities’ (as they came to be known as by late April 2020), within BAME communities was the most frequently proffered explanation. Almost 60 per cent of all articles published in this six-month period speculated that high levels of diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, sickle cell disease, lupus, kidney disease, thalassemia and/or obesity could all be contributing factors to increased COVID rates among non-white Brits.

Various biomedical studies have proven higher levels of underlying health conditions within certain ethnic communities, particularly in Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African diasporic communities in the U.K. (see Ravi, 2020). However, at this point in the pandemic, there was little peer-reviewed and published research connecting the prevalence of comorbidities with severe COVID-19 illness, let alone concrete evidence detailing *which* underlying health conditions were more directly correlated with symptomatic COVID-19 infection. The almost immediate, and very public, unproven connection that the Daily Mail and other media outlets drew between general ill health, BAME individuals, and COVID-19 therefore illuminates widespread ontological perceptions of health within the British context; the presentation of the ‘unhealthy body’ as likely to endure more ill health, and the ‘healthy body’ as seemingly minimally-affected by viral infection, reflects the duality of ‘health’ and ‘unhealth’ within 21st century conceptualizations of the body. As Lock and Vinh-Kim (2018) state, this conception of health and illness as ‘opposite poles along a biological continuum’ has been reified through processes of knowledge production within ‘Western’ biomedicine, that have involved biological classification as a form of race making. As such, by repeatedly referencing the existence of comorbidities within non-white bodies, the Daily Mail discursively situated BAME communities on the ‘unhealth’ side of the continuum, opposing non-white bodies’ ill-health to the foil of the healthy white body.

While not necessarily a conscious discursive strategy by the Daily Mail, the process of attaching racial undertones to the categories of health and unhealth was a diluted continuation of colonial biomedical beliefs that race is a biologically and medically salient category. In early June 2020, the supposition that COVID-19 infection could be directly related to race became even more explicit. On June 4th, the Daily Mail published an article headlined ‘BAME people may face higher risk of dying from coronavirus because of their higher rates of vitamin D deficiencies, scientist says’, followed by the subheading, ‘It is more difficult for people with dark skin to get vitamin D than lighter skin’. Even though this same article later admitted that these findings were neither published, nor peer reviewed, and had actually been quashed by the scientific com-

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munity at large, this idea continued to gain traction and reappeared in multiple articles. Between June 3rd and July 15th, 2020, this vitamin D ‘connection’ was mentioned in more than a third of all articles, without any reference to its unverified nature. The very notion that skin colour impacts susceptibility to the COVID-19 virus situated BAME individuals as biologically inferior to white Brits and tapped into notions of biological determinism. This idea echoed historical biomedical claims that disease susceptibilities and ill health within Black and Brown communities were directly related to biological differences (Cerdena, 2021; Kiple & Kiple, 1980), and thus reflects a type of Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’ doctrine (Kiple & Kiple, 1980).

Although general ill health and comorbidities were mentioned most frequently by the Daily Mail as reasons for the disproportionate death and infection rates, other explanations were also provided. 45 per cent of articles published before June 20th, 2020, referenced the living situations and the lower socio-economic statuses of BAME individuals as two of the reasons why infection rates were so high in the communities. ‘Higher rates of poverty’, ‘socio-economic deprivation’, ‘socioeconomic differences, such as finances’, ‘working in low paid jobs’ and ‘the poverty trap’ were also suggested as alternative explanations. In the context of the neo-liberal free market society of the U.K., with its meritocratic conceptions of wealth accumulation, poverty is often intrinsically believed to be a result of one’s own choices and failings, rather than a consequence of systemic inequalities (Sandel, 2020). That this implication of laziness was connected to non-white communities, and not to the poverty-ridden white ‘working-class’ British family, is no coincidence; it echoes the colonial trope of non-white indolence, which stemmed from the idea that Black and Brown colonized subjects were biologically rendered languid and lethargic by their hot native climates (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992). Despite highlighting very real elements of racial and social inequity within the UK, the Daily Mail managed to simultaneously erase from the narrative the decades of systemic racism and the prolonged history of socio-economic oppression, that have contributed to generational poverty cycles within BAME communities. Rather than using the opportunity to draw attention to the underlying

causes of increased poverty levels within non-white families, the Daily Mail simply reiterated the ideology of meritocracy by adopting a narrative that repeated the trope of the poor, non-white individual whose socio-economic status is a personal failing.

5.3 The Non-White Body as a Source of Contagion

In a move that further connected BAME groups with poverty, the Daily Mail also suggested that the living conditions of non-white families could be a potential reason for high rates of COVID-19 infection. ‘High-density living conditions’, ‘densely populated areas’ of ‘large, multi-generational households’, and the ‘small’, ‘overcrowded’ ‘terraced houses’ were also provided as reasons for high infection rates within the articles. The assumption that the living conditions of most BAME families deviate from the standard of the nuclear family household preferred by white Brits is problematic twofold. Firstly, it minimizes the rich tapestries of differing lived experiences among both the various ethnic minority communities within the U.K., and the individuals within those communities themselves. To assume, for example, that all Brits with Pakistani heritage live in extremely similar situations to recent Chinese immigrants, is to homogenize the vastly diverse range of individuals who fall under the category of BAME groups. Secondly, in the reiteration of this stereotype of the cramped, close-quartered living conditions of extended Brown and Black families, connotations of squalor, degradation and unsanitariness are conjured, thus situating the non-white domestic sphere as a source of contagion. This equation of high levels of contagion with the non-white body is yet another racialized medical belief with a colonial legacy (see Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992; and Lieberman, 2009). However, more relevantly, in the age of social distancing and quarantining, positioning the BAME home as a place of contagion (without accounting for any alternative preventative measures that could have been taken by households to prevent the spread of the virus) thrust the threat of the virus into the realm of the non-white domestic space.

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Aside from the disgust that is connected to discourse connoting imaginings of squalor and social degradation, positioning the non-white domestic sphere as a potential source of contagion has additional affective consequences. By presenting BAME communities, not only as more biologically likely to transmit the coronavirus, but also as more socially likely, these Daily Mail articles generate sentiments of fear of the contagious 'other'. Through this discourse, the BAME domestic sphere becomes distinctly separate from mainstream white British society (who are imagined to be those who occupy the public sphere) and a misperceived barrier between the public and private, the 'us' and the 'them', and the white and non-white body, becomes imagined to contain the virus. This discourse, therefore, worked to conjure affects of fear surrounding both the BAME body, and BAME spaces, that impacts attitudes towards who could, and should, be moving through public spaces, and who should be restricted to the private realm. In a period of intense uncertainty and fear regarding the health and wellness of individuals, and the nation, suggesting that BAME communities were sources of contagion enabled readers to redirect their fear at a group of people rather than at a nebulous future.

5.4 The Rejection of Systemic Racism

In these first few months of the pandemic the Daily Mail was not alone in theorizing that general ill health, poverty, poor living conditions, and biological inferiority were key contributing factors to the disproportionately high COVID infection rates in BAME communities. These speculative explanations were all presented across multiple news outlets, despite having no scientific backing, and were often presented without taking into consideration the historical, social oppressions that contributed to these inequities. However, several months into the pandemic, activists and government officials began demanding that a formal, independent health review be carried out in response to growing public concerns over BAME groups' vulnerability to COVID-19. On May 19th, 2020, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), an independent research group advising the British government, answered this

call. They published a report claiming that BAME Brits were *not* biologically more likely to die from COVID-19 if socio-economic deprivation and underlying health conditions were taken into account (SAGE, 2020). This report was followed by the Public Health England's (PHE) review, of which the first installment was published on June 2nd, 2020. Following an outcry that this first half of the report only confirmed the public's suspicions that BAME communities were hit hardest by the pandemic, the second installment of the review was then released on June 16th. This second installment explicitly listed 'historic racism' and 'hostile environments' for immigrant and non-white groups as key factors for the high rates of COVID-19 in BAME communities (PHE, 2020b).

Despite both government-issued reviews drawing attention to the socio-historic contexts that produce financial, social and health inequities among BAME groups in the U.K., the Daily Mail discourse surrounding the causes of COVID-19 disparities did not adjust to reflect these findings. In fact, the opposite happened; from June 3rd onwards, almost 40 per cent of the published articles repeatedly stated that the causes of disproportionate death in BAME communities remained unknown. The articles repeatedly cast doubt on the veracity of the PHE and SAGE report findings, by stating that scientists were 'struggling to explain why', and 'yet to pin down exactly why minority groups are at a heightened risk of infection'. One of the articles published June 30th even explicitly announced that 'there is a crisis of confidence in Public Health England', and further bolstered this by stating that "'historic racism" and its links to Covid-19 are not well explained in the report'. The Daily Mail articles thus served to reject the findings of the long-awaited reports. Instead, the language adopted by the Daily Mail presented a narrative that feigned ignorance of the socio-political factors that impacted disproportionate infection rates.

It is not all that unsurprising that the Daily Mail narrative diverged so dramatically from the research findings; by denouncing the findings of the PHE's review, and feigning ignorance of the causes of disproportionate COVID-19 cases in BAME communities, the Daily Mail could

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firmly reject ‘historic racism’ as an explanation for present day health disparities. These structural explanations for racial health inequalities proposed by the PHE and SAGE reports threatened the very identity of the UK as a ‘tolerant’ and ‘multicultural’ country (see Yildiz, 2021). As such, by rejecting the explanation of systemic racism, the Daily Mail could also quash the image of the U.K. as a fundamentally racist society – an image that had gained traction among the British political left in response to the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests at the end of May 2020. This attempt to deny the existence of institutional racism was particularly evident in an opinion piece published by Stephen Glover on June 29th, 2020. His article stated, ‘this is what the “Black Lives Matter” protesters are alleging – that Britain is a fundamentally racist society. Little evidence is adduced’.

In addition to denying the image of the U.K. as a racist society, the articles published in this period also questioned the efficacy of government actions in the early-pandemic period. Several articles, for example, accused the government of ‘winging it’ and being ‘inadequate’, claiming that institutions and public health professionals were feeling ‘let down’. This discourse, of both a non-racist Britain, and an ineffective, untrustworthy government was adopted to appeal to the typical Daily Mail audience – 76 per cent of whom have historically expressed dissatisfaction with the government (Duffy and Rowden, 2004). Articles that expressed governmental distrust and skepticism towards political leaders and health researchers therefore aligned better with the views of Daily Mail target-readers, who have been historically unsatisfied with authority figures and experts. Similarly, expressing doubt about the salience of socio-political factors on health helped present a narrative that appealed to readers who could more readily accept that health is dictated predominantly by an individual’s biology rather than by socio-cultural factors. By adopting discourse that Daily Mail journalists knew would appeal to their intended readership, the outlet could ensure continued audience loyalty (and thus meet their outlet’s financial goals) in an increasingly diversified media industry.

The appeal of this alternative reality of a non-racist U.K., that the Daily

Mail presents, works affectively on several levels. Firstly, the narrative helped readers believe that BAME individuals are dying, not because of the racist actions of white Brits, but rather, because of their own ill-health and social-economic positions. Implicating the individual (rather than the collective or the structural) in the disproportionate suffering of BAME communities from COVID-19, relinquished white individuals of all responsibility in the participation of historic racism that has contributed to systemic health inequalities. From an affective perspective this discourse thus enabled feelings of relief for white Brits, who no longer have to believe that they are complicit in creating the racist conditions that have resulted in the deaths of thousands of BAME individuals; preferring individual and essentialist explanations, over science-backed structural explanations, absolves Brits of their role in contributing to the continuing high levels of COVID infection throughout the UK, and the disproportionate death rates within BAME communities.

Secondly, rejecting racism as an explanation for high rates of COVID-19 infection in BAME communities also helped redirect fear. Rather than fearing having to come to terms with, and dealing with the consequences of, systemic racism within British society (during an already-intense period of social uncertainty), readers could instead continue to redirect their fear of contagion onto the non-white body. Scapegoating non-white bodies in times of crisis, by imagining them as contagious, is not a new phenomenon. (see Hardy, 2020; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992; and Lieberman, 2009 for more on the colonial legacy of contagion of the non-white body in times of crisis). Yet, in a health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when the health of the nation and the society was so closely intertwined with the actions and health of individuals, identifying the BAME body as a point of contagion, also meant that BAME individuals became scapegoats for both high rates of infection in their own communities, and for infection and suffering within British society at large.

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5.5 The Affects of Discursive Repetition

The affective power of the discourse that I have analyzed lies not in readers' engagement with the individual Daily Mail articles, but rather in the cumulative effect of this discourse. Many of the articles published in this early pandemic period on the Daily Mail website actually re-use whole sentences, and even paragraphs, from previously published articles on similar topics. On the one hand, this speaks to the demands that journalists faced in the first few months of the pandemic to publish daily up-to-date news, as new data and information about COVID-19 emerged. On the other hand, this phenomenon is also a direct consequence of the medium of publishing; unlike traditional print newspapers, which are typically purchased and read daily by a continuous audience, online newspaper articles are frequently read asynchronously to their publication date. Moreover, online articles are read by both loyal readers who engage with articles directly through the website, daily email blasts, or the mobile app, as well as sporadic readers who are introduced to the article in algorithmically-impacted news feeds, or through social media. As such, many of these online news articles contain verbatim sections from previous news articles to provide context for online readers who may not be as familiar with the Daily Mail's longitudinal news narrative as loyal print-newspaper readers would be.

For those readers engaging with this Daily Mail content more sporadically, the affective consequences of the discourse may have been far less intense than for loyal readers. However, for Daily Mail readers and/or subscribers, who regularly sought out COVID-related articles during the first few months of the pandemic, they would have encountered discourses of racial scapegoating, language expressing distrust towards experts, and denials of a racist British society on a daily basis. The cumulative consequences of daily engagement with this discourse may have only made its emotional impacts more intense – becoming even more pronounced when considering the bombardment of COVID-related information that readers were encountering during this period from various other news sources and digital/social media sites. At a time of such intense uncertainty and overwhelm of information, narratives that

attempted to simplify the causes and consequences of COVID-19 (such as the Daily Mail narrative regarding biological proclivity for COVID infection) were no doubt more appealing to readers.

6 Conclusion

By carrying out a critical discourse analysis, this article has tracked the evolving narrative surrounding BAME groups and COVID-19 that was presented by the Daily Mail during the first six months of the pandemic. I have argued that the mediatized representation of BAME individuals and communities shifted dramatically during this period, in response to emerging data and the actions of the British government. While BAME healthcare workers were initially presented as heroic in the first few weeks of British national lockdown, by the end of July 2020, the articles on the Daily Mail website had established a very different narrative; as research emerged suggesting that the disproportionate number of deaths within BAME communities were a result of decades of historic racism and inequality, the Daily Mail attempted to decenter these scientific claims and rejected systemic racism as a possible explanation. Instead, the articles created an alternative truth world that maintained the status-quo of existent social and racial hierarchies, by employing historical racial tropes to simultaneously position BAME individuals as biologically inferior to white Brits, and to increasingly imply that they were personally responsible for their disproportionate suffering from the virus. Through these repeated, and decontextualized, claims of poverty, general ill-health and bad living conditions, the Daily Mail was thus able to shift responsibility for COVID health inequities away from mainstream, white British society, and on to BAME individuals. In this process, the differing lived experiences, socio-economic statuses, living conditions and health of BAME communities were minimized, to create a homogenous group of non-white individuals who were cumulatively presented as a source of contagion and threat to the health of white Brits, and to the British nation.

Tracing this shifting discourse and understanding it as both a reflection

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of widespread societal beliefs, and as an influencer of these beliefs, better illuminates the often-invisible racist ideologies that are deeply embedded in British society, and that came to the fore during this period of public crisis, when white, hegemonic social norms were challenged by the invisible and intangible threat of the COVID virus. Considering the emotional and affective potential of this shifting discourse also helps delineate why these racist ideologies regarding the body, health, societal success, and communities have prevailed for so long within the U.K. It goes some way to explaining, for instance, how it was possible for a major news outlet to repeatedly and consistently suggest that skin colour impacts susceptibility to viral infection, without referring to any reliable scientific evidence to support this claim. Moreover, by demonstrating how the language used by the Daily Mail was able to create and reflect emotions of fear, uncertainty, and aversion among white Brits during the early days of the pandemic, this article also provides insight into the role that affect plays in processes of contemporary racial scapegoating and creating a shared imaginary of a racism-free society. While it may be impossible to know exactly *why* individual Brits were convinced that BAME individuals were more likely to be infected by COVID-19, viewing these Daily Mail articles as ‘repositories of feelings and emotions’ (Cvetkovich, 2003: 7) helps us better understand the mechanisms through which racialized conceptions of the body are sustained and reified well into the 21st century.

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