

Reporting the cost-of-living crisis: A framing analysis of victims of, and solutions to, the crisis as reported in UK national newspapers 2022-23

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Abstract

This paper analyses 1,055 UK national newspaper articles on the cost-of-living crisis published in 18 months between February 2022 and August 2023. This study utilizes framing analysis to examine the reporting of the crisis, with a specific focus on the presentation of those identified as victims of the crisis. The paper also discusses how the news media report individual and macroeconomic solutions to the crisis. The study finds that market rationalism and individualist explanations dominate news coverage of a structural macroeconomic crisis. This study finds an apparent deviation from traditional reporting of poverty in that the news media presents the cost-of-living crisis as universal. As such, the ‘othering’ of people living in poverty is less evident here than in similar studies. The study finds that the framing devices used to communicate the crisis often seek to minimize the impact of inequality, which is at the heart of the current crisis.

Key Words: Cost of living crisis, poverty, inequality, UK, framing analysis, national newspapers, inequality, social class.

Introduction

People experiencing poverty in the United Kingdom have been caught in a perfect storm of adverse conditions. Brexit, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic have negatively impacted Britain's most vulnerable citizens. After a decade of austerity, these conditions have worsened because of cuts to public services. The austerity response to the 2008 financial crisis preceded the exponential growth of food banks nationwide (Lambie-Mumford, 2019), and the energy crisis brought on by the war in Ukraine has also seen the creation of warm spaces (Barford & Gray, 2022). Inflationary pressures on food and energy, combined with the retrenchment of public spending through austerity, provide strong evidence of absolute poverty in the United Kingdom. Energy companies have legally forced entry into the homes of people who are behind on their energy bills to install pre-payment meters (Kirby, 2023). Benefit sanctions have increased despite internal research from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) providing evidence of their ineffectiveness (Department of Work and Pensions, 2023). The news coverage of this issue deserves close attention amidst this evidence of absolute poverty. This study examines a critical gap in the existing literature by investigating news framing of the current cost of living crisis (COLC) and questioning whether this contemporary issue represents a shift in how the news media reports poverty.

Literature Review

Golding and Middleton's (1982) seminal study traced press and public attitudes to welfare reform that drew on long-established historical ideas of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor'. The construction of the 'underserving' concerning welfare was key to undermining political consensus around the welfare state. News coverage of poverty in the UK has undergone a period of relative continuity since this period, where the press has crafted narratives that stigmatize economically disadvantaged communities (Harkins & Lugo-Ocando, 2016; 2017) in a way that blames the victims for their circumstances (Lugo-Ocando, 2015). These trends in news about poverty have been well-established over a consistent period (Harkins & Lugo-Ocando, 2017; Morrison, 2019), which has reflected the development of a neoliberal political consensus in countries such as the UK and Canada (Redden, 2014). One of the critical features of this news coverage has been the individualization of issues such as poverty and inequality, which have been framed as personal rather than systemic failings. News coverage of poverty plays a critical role in how the public understands the issue (Schifferes & Knowles, 2022). The news industry often individualizes systemic issues such as the COLC. During the 2008 financial crisis, news coverage blamed specific figures from the banking industry, and this practice 'suppressed discussions of market failings' (Kelsey, et al., 2017, p. 3). News reporting of the economy saw bankers constructed variously as both 'genius providers of wealth' and 'destroyers of economies' (Kelsey, 2014, p. 327). This way of communicating the financial crisis constructed both periods of economic stability and periods of financial crisis as emerging from the agency of individual bankers. Furthermore, scholars have argued that the news media serves to justify and rationalize market approaches to inequality while opposing redistributive policies and offering only 'restrained arguments' in favour of social democratic institutions such as the welfare state or economic development (Grisold & Theine, 2020, p. 1090). This worldview is shaped by their reliance on sources from government and industry when discussing poverty and inequality (Devereux, 1998; Harkins & Lugo-Ocando, 2017). By focusing on victims of, and solutions to the crisis, this paper seeks to examine whether contemporary news reporting of the COLC represents a continuation of these individualist and stigmatising narratives; or if the universal impact of the crisis represents a new direction for the news media in shaping the conversation around poverty. The very term 'cost-of-living-crisis' has been universally accepted and repeated by political parties of all stripes as well as

the media and non-profit organisations such as charities and foundations (Chakelian, 2022). The universal inclusion implied by this term reflects the early days of the UK government's austerity agenda when the political phrase 'we are all in it together' was frequently used to emphasize a collective, universal experience in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. As Marsden points out, this phrase emphasizes 'shared values and romanticized struggle forward' in a way that removes 'economic differences from view, and with them, the unequal impact of factors such as cuts to public spending and welfare' (Marsden, 2023, p. 82). The phrase emerged again during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic as multinational corporations presented a message of a united public who were 'equally susceptible to the negative impacts of COVID-19' (Sobande, 2020, p. 1036). As Sobande points out, 'This commodified construction of 'we' dismisses the experiences of those who are most at risk and worst affected by COVID-19' (Sobande, 2020, p. 1037). This universal language masks the fact that these periods of crisis exacerbate inequality and are experienced differently across the class divide. Marsden has advocated the importance of studying social class during times of 'fundamental political and social change' (Marsden, 2023, p. 71). Discussions of class are often absent from news coverage of poverty, which avoids discussions about inequality; as Tyler points out, 'the problem that the concept of class describes is inequality', adding that 'class labels' variously reveal structural conditions of inequality' (Tyler, 2015, p. 496). The impacts of the COLC will be felt differently by people occupying different positions in the social hierarchy. This opens a need to understand how these differences are reported in the news. The extant literature suggests that the news media will report the crisis in reductive ways (Devereaux 1998; Nisbet 2010), and it is instructive to examine what these are. This paper achieves this by asking questions about the victims of the crisis and examining suggested solutions to the crisis in a detailed and systematic way. The novelty of this paper lies in its contemporary relevance and methodology, which combine to shine an essential light on the communication of the COLC.

Early responses to the COLC in academia have emerged from public health researchers who emphasize the importance of the crisis in terms of its potential impact on the poorest members of society (Pybus, 2022; Singh & Uthayakumar-Cumarasamy, 2022; Premila Webster & Neal, 2022). However, news coverage of the COLC has yet to be subjected to similar analysis. News framing of poverty has been shaped through broad frames of analysis whereby villains abuse the welfare system, and victims are ground down by the 'demanding socioeconomic system' (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 86). These human-interest angles form part of the journalistic framing process (de Vreese, 2010), and this study examines these further by looking at the victims of the crisis in detail. Iyengar's work found that poverty frames in the news significantly influence how the public understands the problem; stories about individuals led to audiences being less inclined to hold the government responsible for causing poverty or taking steps to alleviate it (Iyengar, 1990, p. 35). Nisbett's research identified the 'responsible economic planning' frame, which emphasized poverty as a systemic issue tied to broader socioeconomic issues, and the 'sympathy for the poor' frame, which individualized the issue (Nisbett, 2010, p. 69). Framing poverty as an individual issue, even from a sympathetic perspective, can have the effect of distorting the issue because the 'memorability and vividness' of personal stories come 'at the expense of support for public policy' (Nisbet, 2010, p. 63). This paper thus seeks to make a novel contribution to a critical gap in the contemporary literature on whether the language of universalism around the contemporary cost-of-living crisis represents a rupture in journalistic narratives of poverty and welfare.

Methodology

One of the unique things about the recent crisis has been the ubiquitous usage of the term 'cost-of-living-crisis' across political divides. This term's universal and widespread use offered a

helpful set of keywords to narrow down a corpus of articles for analysis. The sample was gathered through a headline search in Nexis UK. The headline search was selected because newspapers across the political spectrum have used the COLC terminology. This means that articles focussed on this subject often use the term directly, unlike more general terms such as poverty or inequality. This allowed for a focused search, although there is the risk that some relevant articles were excluded from taking this approach.

Nevertheless, examining the articles using the term directly is essential because there can be no ambiguity about the focus of the articles in this sample. A search was carried out for the term ‘cost of living crisis’ across the seven most popular UK national newspapers: *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*. This is a comprehensive sample of the biggest circulation newspapers sold in physical copies in newsstands in the United Kingdom. Declining print sales have meant that most newspapers have withdrawn their sales figures from ABC circulation data; however, these were the national titles with the highest circulation within the last available data; together, these titles cover 98% of the UK National newspaper market circulation (Tobitt & Majid 2024). Other high-circulation newspapers, such as *The Metro* and *The London Evening Standard*, were excluded for being freesheets or having a regional focus. The decision to select a comprehensive sample of national newspapers with high circulation meant that there was a conservative political bias in the sample, with five of the newspapers being politically conservative; these were *The Times*, *The Sun* (Owned by News UK, formerly the ‘Murdoch press’), *The Daily Telegraph* (Owned by Alix Partners receivership), *The Daily Mail* (Owned by The Daily Mail and General Trust), and *The Daily Express* (Owned by Reach PLC). The two left-leaning or liberal newspapers were *The Daily Mirror* (Owned by Reach PLC) and *The Guardian* (Owned by The Scott Trust).

Overall sample

The political orientation of the newspapers is reflected in the number of articles found in this sample, with left-leaning or liberal papers focusing more attention on the COLC. There was less coverage in the five conservative-leaning newspapers. The timescale selected was from February 2022, when the final coronavirus restrictions were relaxed in the UK, to August 2023, giving an 18-month spread of articles covering the post-pandemic crisis. This timescale was selected because the pandemic had dominated the news agenda, and as it faded, the COLC emerged as an important news story. The 18-month period tracked the issue over a significant timeframe. This exercise yielded a data corpus of 1,081 articles broken down by each newspaper in the following table (Figure 1).

Newspaper	Number of articles
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	123
<i>The Daily Express</i>	100
<i>The Guardian</i>	277
<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	225
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	147
<i>The Sun</i>	97
<i>The Times</i>	112
Total	1,081

Table 1: Total number of articles analysed

The data was subjected to a systematic analysis based on other similar newspaper research studies (Hilton & Hunt, 2010). Once the sample was selected, a digital file for each newspaper

was extracted separately and exported into a Microsoft Word file. These files contained all the contextual coding data, such as newspaper title, word count, and date of publication. The articles were then coded using inclusion and exclusion criteria. Letters to the editor and articles not focussing on the UK were excluded from the sample, as well as articles from the Irish edition of *The Daily Mirror*. This led to a final total of 1,055 articles, which were subject to framing analysis. These articles were subjected to conceptual coding with a focus on manifest content that was directly linked to research questions related to the news coverage within the sample:

1. Who are the victims of the crisis?
2. What are the solutions to the crisis?

A coding frame was developed for these two research questions, the results were collated in spreadsheet format, and the analysis was based on manifest content. The first batch of coding related to identifying victims of the crisis, and many of the articles identified an apparent victim of the COLC.

Victims and solutions	Definition/Sample text
Young people [victims]	More people are cancelling their video subscriptions to save money in the face of the cost of living squeeze, with under-24s most likely to walk away (Prescott 2022).
Market forces [victims] – Defined as ‘Retailers’	Retailers are facing a Bleak Friday with warnings the sales event will be hit by the cost of living crisis and delivery issues linked to strikes (Poulter, 2022).
Individual solutions	As a result [of the COLC], thrifty tinned goods and old-school ingredients are firmly back on the menu (Buchanan, 2022).
Market solutions	As the cost of living crisis bites, we are all looking for better value, especially when it comes to holidays. And the good news for families this October break is kids under 12 can stay and eat free with Wyndham Hotels & Resorts (<i>The Sun</i> , 2022b)
Macroeconomic solutions	Pressure is building on the leaders of Britain’s two biggest political parties to support higher taxes on wealth amid growing fears over the impact that a renewed austerity drive would have amid the cost of living crisis (Partington, 2022).

Table 2: Example frames

Not all victims were individuals, and the ‘market forces’ victim frame captured a wide range of articles describing corporations and economic institutions as victims of the crisis. In terms of coding the data on solutions to the crisis, a few articles focused on macroeconomic solutions such as wealth or windfall taxes, and others focused on individual actions such as thrifty cooking tips. These individual and macroeconomic solutions were instructive in terms of understanding how the crisis is communicated and the range of possible options available for tackling the crisis.

Once each question's coding frame was completed, a framing analysis was carried out. Goffman describes the frame as a ‘schemata of interpretation’ consisting of ‘natural’ and

'social' frameworks (Goffman, 1986 [1974], pp. 21-22). This study is interested in understanding these 'social frameworks' which, according to Goffman:

Provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the human being (Goffman, 1986 [1974], p. 22).

This idea that social frames are linked to human agency relates directly to the research questions that were tackled as part of the framing analysis for this study. A frame exists as a 'central organizing idea...for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue' (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3). Reese agrees that frames are organizing principles and, linking back to Goffman, argues that they are 'socially shared' and 'work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world' (Reese, 2001, p. 11). Entman offers a definition of framing that is closely related to the questions asked in this paper, and he describes how:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Entman's definition helped guide this paper's framing research, which pays close attention to treatment and recommendations to resolve the COLC. The framing process is also central to journalism as Gitlin suggests frames 'organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports' (Gitlin, 2003 [1980], p. 7). Indeed, it is essential to note that by its nature, the news industry is engaging in framing and frame building as it produces news content (de Vreese, 2010, p. 187). The operationalization of frame analysis in this study was underpinned by the 'qualitative paradigm', and the frames were identified inductively by drawing on the data gathered from the framing analysis. As with other studies in this paradigm, this approach neglects quantification and instead describes the frames qualitatively through engagement with detailed quotes (Matthes, 2009, p. 351). The data gathered as part of this exercise was categorized into overarching frames, and these were developed through a continual process of examining the framing literature, the example texts, and literature on the subject to draw out the frames that related to each research question. The findings of the study are outlined in the next section.

Analysis: What the data says

This analysis is presented in two sections, which deal with victims of COLC and solutions to COLC. These relate to the framing analysis of data gathered in response to the two research questions outlined in the methodology section. This data has been analyzed inductively to uncover frames explaining how the COLC has been reported in the UK press. The first set of results focuses on how COLC victims have been reported.

Who are the victims of the COLC?

This analysis draws on the list of victims of the COLC and categorizes them into three separate overarching frames. These frames are market forces, the 'bougie broke', and people living in poverty. Each frame is analyzed in more detail below, beginning with market forces as victims of the crisis.

Victim frame 1: Market forces

One of the most consistent ways of reporting on the cost-of-living crisis is to highlight how multinational corporations and high-street shops are coping. Consumer confidence surveys are

reported regularly alongside reports about the impact on specific retailers such as supermarkets, casinos, car showrooms, performing arts organisations, lottery ticket sellers, and restaurant chains. These articles focus on the impact the crisis has on financial markets generally, as well as paying specific attention to the fortunes of a range of different businesses. Articles single out the impact of downward sales trends around particular events, such as Boxing Day and Black Friday, where declining sales are attributed to the COLC. These articles appear across the spectrum of UK newspapers, including liberal and left-leaning newspapers such as *The Daily Mirror* or *The Guardian*. A typical example in *The Guardian* focuses on the fashion brand Asos; their growth forecast figures are quoted in the piece, as well as the dip in the companies' prospective profit margins (Sweney, 2022). Multinational corporations such as Amazon and high street shops such as Marks and Spencer are also presented as victims of the COLC. In a typical example of this reporting from *The Daily Mail*:

Marks & Spencer was hit with a downgrade as Deutsche Bank analysts warned the retailer would suffer from the cost of living crisis (Muirhead, 2022).

This framing is an example of 'market rationality', where business interests are constructed as being of paramount importance to the functioning of society (Cruikshank, 2016). The market rationale for these stories speaks to a particular way of understanding the broader economy that is rooted in the idea that the functioning of the market is the critical priority in times of financial crisis. These articles frequently adopt the perspective of the businesses involved; in one article with the headline 'Ladbrokes owner hit by cost-of-living crisis', the focus is on the betting company losing sales. Ladbrokes representatives are quoted as arguing that they will be resilient against the crisis because if people cannot afford to go out, then 'they play games on our sites or watch sport on the TV and bet' (Boland, 2022). In the case of Ladbrokes, this reporting exists, as well as reports in the same newspaper about the rise of problem gambling whereby people were using betting shops to stay warm and gambling more frequently in an attempt to win money to pay their bills (Hall, 2023). Indeed, clinics have opened in the UK to deal with gambling addiction, which is an increasingly problematic issue across the country (Metcalf, 2023). In addition to framing victims through the lens of market rationalism, frames linked to social class were also uncovered by this study.

Victim frame 2: The 'Bougie broke'

One feature article in *The Times* focuses on the plight of the 'bougie broke' – these are wealthy people who make minor lifestyle adjustments because of the COLC. Being 'bougie broke' is to be:

Not broke broke. You can still afford the osteopath, or the highlights at the hairdresser, or the Botox (just about), but you're dragging the dates out a bit to spread the cost (Money-Coutts, 2023).

This term is a useful label for describing the way that wealthy people are presented as victims of the crisis in the news. In another piece profiling a series of victims of the crisis, *The Times* interviews a family who owns a 5-bedroom cottage in Hertfordshire and has a take-home pay of £4,500 per month, a pensioner with a £420,000 private pension held in investment trusts and a business owner who is a higher rate taxpayer and lives in a five-bedroom house in Worcester. The business owner is concerned with potential increases in his children's £25,000 per annum private school fees. There is an explicit acknowledgement from the business owner in this piece that his family 'aren't on the breadline'. An article in the *Daily Telegraph* offers readers a

profile of Emma Manners, the Duchess of Rutland; the feature holds her up as an example of resilience against the COLC:

The Duchess, famously frugal, is perhaps better equipped than any of her peers for the looming cost of living crisis. For years, she has shopped at Asda, calling herself ‘an Asda girl (Bell, 2022).

Furthermore, *The Times* presents the late Queen as the ‘make do and mend Queen’, a role model for frugal living, listing her sacrifices such as ‘repurposing the Christmas wrapping paper’, recycling outfits, using £30 electric heaters, and having shallow baths at low temperatures (Thomson, 2022). There is a significant trend where articles use the wealthiest people in society as role models for frugal living. Nevertheless, there was also a clear trend in which the newspapers highlighted the suffering caused by the COLC.

Victim frame 3: People living in poverty

In addition to the detailed features of the plight of the ‘bougie broke’, there are articles that focus on the sharp end of the crisis. One piece highlighted the significant increase in evictions in England, up 40% in the reported quarter of 2022. Vulnerable groups included as victims of the crisis include cancer patients, elderly people, people experiencing absolute poverty through having pre-payment meters for their energy supply, people who are skipping meals or using food banks, gambling addicts, disabled people, people who use mental health services, ethnic minority workers, domestic abuse victims and foster children.

An article in *The Daily Express* profiles a family that cannot afford the energy costs needed to run their disabled daughter’s specialist medical equipment. Their electricity costs are reported as having risen from £2,080 to £8,320 (Jeeves, 2023). Another piece in the *Daily Telegraph* highlights the difficulty elderly residents have in affording social care; a patient is quoted in this piece as describing how:

I have had to stop putting my heating on and not use the oven or gas, I am microwaving more meals or eating cold meals like sandwiches and pasta. I am trying to not switch my lights on unless it’s really, really dark and I cannot see my hand in front of me (Dixon, 2022).

An article in *The Guardian* reports interviews with food bank users in a deprived area of Birmingham; one of them describes how:

My fridge is empty, my freezer is empty, so I thought I’ve got no choice now, I’ve got to stop being so stubborn. It’s my birthday this weekend, and I don’t want to have nothing to eat (Murray, 2023).

The stark contrast between the profiles of the man struggling to pay private school fees and the man struggling to eat is not acknowledged in this news coverage. This shines a spotlight on how narratives of universalism distort the true extent of the COLC, which is driving absolute poverty in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. The paper now turns its attention to examining the way that solutions to the crisis have been framed.

Solving the COLC?

Solutions to the crisis have been divided into three primary frames, with individualist, macroeconomic, and market solutions to the crisis being the main categories. Individual solutions were the most common in the dataset, and these will be examined in the following section.

Solutions frame 1: Individual solutions

Individual stories dominate suggested solutions to the COLC in the UK national press. These include shopping around for broadband deals, selling your belongings online, cancelling subscriptions to Netflix, shopping in budget supermarkets, buying second-hand wedding dresses, and a range of other suggestions. The stakes are not equal in terms of how drastic these solutions need to be. There is a series of articles highlighting how people have given up their pets because they can no longer afford them. Articles also clearly intersect with the areas of British society that the COLC most acutely impacts, such as work. Solutions related to the world of work include finding a second job or ‘side hustle’; pensioners and retirees are also encouraged to go back to work. An article in *The Daily Express* is headlined ‘Work Forever! Two-thirds say they may never retire – the article highlights how two-thirds of people in their 60s are looking to cut their hours rather than retire completely (O’Grady, 2022). The phrase ‘people are looking’ suggests an element of choice rather than being the necessary response to a dysfunctional economy and labour market. Other solutions to the COLC are related to the growing rise in food poverty and rising prices in supermarkets.

People are increasingly reliant on buying reduced food and changing their diets to eat a range of different foods. Food becomes a key area for individuals to cut back on their spending. Solutions include swapping chicken for turkey, switching to frozen food, and buying cheddar from the pound shop. There is also a range of articles suggesting people are eating or should eat a range of unusual foods, including pilchards, spam fritters (Wood, 2022), fish heads (Buchanan, 2022), and salvaged waste food. There is also a consistent focus on making cheap recipes in response to the COLC; an article in *The Sun* gives readers recipes to help them eat for £1 per day (*The Sun*, 2022a).

There is a clear educational element to these cheap recipe suggestions. People struggling to afford food are taught how to budget and find creative ways to cook. A passage in a *Daily Telegraph* article makes the educational link explicit:

Another subject overdue a return is home economics or domestic science. It’s pretty well designed for the cost-of-living crisis, enabling students to work out a budget, mend things and cook from scratch (McDonagh, 2022).

The idea that people suffering from poverty could resolve the issue with better education in budgeting is a consistent theme in UK political and media discussions about poverty. In contrast, there is a consistent focus on the existence of absolute food poverty. Reports highlighting people skipping meals or giving up food to afford sanitary products appear in the same newspapers suggesting people eat spam fritters or £1 recipes.

A range of articles suggest housing-related solutions to the crisis, including housesitting for wealthy property owners, living on a boat, taking in lodgers, and flat-sharing for the over 50s. Closely linked to this are suggested solutions that involve reducing energy costs; these include sheltering in libraries, switching to cheaper appliances, turning down thermostats and putting on extra thermal layers, using the washing machine less, turning your heating off, and learning to cook at different times of the day. Class dynamics are also evident in articles on housing solutions. In a piece with the headline ‘I moved abroad to survive the cost of living crisis’, a journalist cited moving abroad as a solution to the high cost of living in the UK – the author of the piece was headhunted by a magazine in Abu Dhabi that offered her a six-figure tax-free salary. Other examples of people who were able to use this solution include a record label

publicist who moved to Canada and earned a six-figure salary, allowing her a large amount of disposable income. Other people featured in this piece leave the UK for the French Riviera and Mexican islands. The middle and upper classes are also most likely to benefit from another genre of individualist solutions, which involve thrifty tips about saving money. An article in *The Daily Mail* explains how investors can protect themselves from the impact of the crisis and ‘keep their long-term investment wealth intact’ (Rickard Strauss, 2022). An article in *The Guardian* directly tackles the phenomenon of wealthy people acting as though they are caught in the COLC; author Julain Baggini asks ‘why so many of those still comfortably off feel the need to talk as though they are on the edge too,’ describing people in this category as ‘thriftifarians’ (Baggini, 2022). The article suggested a range of solutions to the COLC for the upper and middle classes, including booking less regular appointments for the cleaner and the gardener, decanting cheaper brand handwash into designer bottles, hiding Tesco teabags in a Fortum and Mason tin, buying alcohol from Aldi and Costco, buying water from M&S (Instead of Fortnum and Mason), cancelling exercise classes and working out at home to YouTube videos, flying economy class, and reducing farrier fees by only getting your horse’s front hooves cared for. The varying degrees of suggested individual solutions are rooted in social class, where one group decides between heating or eating, and another decides between shopping in Lidl or Aldi. The stark inequalities are evident in the presentation of these individual solutions. However, the overemphasis on this type of activity as a way of coping with the COLC locates the solutions and, therefore, the responsibility for dealing with the crisis at the level of the individual. This has been identified as a feature of neoliberalism, where structural problems are tackled by individual policies (Gray & Lawrence, 2001, p. 283). Nevertheless, there were a limited number of articles in the data suggesting more structural remedies for the COLC.

Solutions frame 2: Macroeconomic and political solutions

The most striking thing about reading through this dataset is how few articles directly criticize the government's response to the COLC. Individuals and market forces act like a shield insulating the state from criticism. In terms of macroeconomic solutions to the crisis, newspapers are more likely to revert to their own agenda; this was identified by Harcup and O’Neil as being one of the features of contemporary ‘news values’, defined as ‘the criteria involved in the selection of news’ (Harcup & O’Neill, 2016, p. 1471) So, for example, *The Guardian* suggest increasing welfare expenditure, freezing prescription charges, cutting fuel duty, government help with energy bills, cutting taxes, a windfall tax for energy firms and taxes on empty properties, the leading liberal newspaper reports on a campaign by non-profit organisations such as charities, social enterprizes, and co-operatives to increase taxes on wealth (Partington, 2022). Environmental solutions are also suggested, including transitioning away from fossil fuels, brokering an improved EU energy deal, and investing in energy-efficient homes. Indeed, *The Guardian* explicitly links the cost-of-living crisis to the climate crisis. In direct contrast to this, cutting green initiatives is suggested in an opinion piece in *The Sun*. Douglas Murray argues against taking action to tackle the climate crisis:

...at a time when everybody's wallets are hurting, the Green nuttury just makes everything worse. Again and again, the things that were demanded of us turn out to have a price tag attached. And a pretty hefty one at that (Murray 2023).

This sort of 'culture wars' debate where newspapers attach the COLC to their own agenda plays out in a range of articles that suggest different solutions, including re-joining the single market, Scottish independence, cutting food tariffs, raising taxes, windfall taxes for energy companies, banks raising rates and companies curbing wages. There is persistent coverage of pressure on the government to cut taxes in response to the crisis. There are also smaller-scale state solutions

suggested, including scaling back the coronation, delaying the renewal of the Royal Yacht, and legally extending the length of an MOT so cars would be tested for roadworthiness less often. The lack of clear consensus or direction in terms of structural solutions to the crisis is perhaps why the individualist solutions are so much more prominent in the sample. However, it is interesting to note how few hold the government accountable for the crisis; this supports Iyengar's previous research (Iyengar, 1990, p. 35) into framing responsibility for poverty and highlights the importance of news framing on stories such as this. The final frame analysed in this paper examines market-based solutions to the COLC.

Solutions frame 3: Market solutions

Corporations are presented as the primary victims of the crisis, and they are also framed as having many of the solutions to it. There is a clear partnership between news organizations and companies in promoting cut-price goods, including budget suncream from Boots, cheaper holidays, cut-price rail tickets, cheap Christmas gift guides, and budget brand goods for motorists. Supermarkets cutting prices becomes a newsworthy event. A crisis that has seen increased levels of absolute poverty becomes part of an advertising campaign to sell a range of different products and services that are branded as being designed to help people beat the COLC. An article in *The Daily Mirror* links to a range of leisure providers advertising cheap days out (Stuart, 2023). This is part of a consistent trend across the sample that shows market solutions to the crisis that promote businesses and, again, tend to be written from the perspective of those organizations. This evidence indicates that the 'compromised fourth estate' that showed the corporate capture of journalism through public relations has continued at pace since the study was carried out (Lewis, et al., 2008).

Conclusion

This paper presents an original analysis of the cost of living crisis that contributes novel insights into the way that the news media have covered the COLC. The findings suggest that not all examples of economic crisis are communicated through the conceptual lens of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. What makes the framing of the COLC unique is the focus on the universality of an issue that has an impact on the lives of all the citizens of the UK, including the Royal Family. This is a rupture from the findings in similar studies that have highlighted the way that the news media often blame the victims of social and economic crises by focusing on their individual choices and behaviour. There are also clear continuities here with other studies because this paper uncovers a set of framing devices that emphasise the universal impact of the crisis in a way that masks the existence of deep inequality in society. The 'bougie broke' are presented as role models for thrifty living and the education they provide can help society mitigate the crisis. This framing disguises the deeply unequal impact of a crisis that has seen increases in actual poverty based on shortages of essential items such as food, energy, and housing. It also individualises solutions to the crisis in a way that absolves the state from having responsibility over macroeconomic policy that could be used to mitigate the crisis. This individualisation of social problems is consistent with the ideology of market rationalism that underpins much of the news coverage discussed here. This way of explaining the crisis places the institutions of the free market as being both the principal victims of the crisis and the forces that are responsible for coming up with solutions to the crisis. Newspaper audiences are encouraged to show concern for multinational corporations and high street shops. While this paper has found that the stigmatization of people living in poverty by the UK press has been curbed in news coverage of the COLC – the social class dynamics and inherent inequality underpinning the crisis are evident in this sample of news coverage. Even though inequality remains primarily ignored by the news industry as an explanatory framework for the cost-of-

living crisis, while these dynamics were evident across all the newspapers in the sample analysed, the left/liberal press were more likely to suggest macroeconomic solutions to the crisis with *The Guardian* more likely to adopt frames that examined the crisis as a public issue which needs systemic solutions rather than individual actions. Like other research that relies on digital databases such as Nexis this study is limited by the search terms used to gather the data and further research on this subject could examine the existence of the typical stigmatising rhetoric that is often found in studies that focus on news coverage of the social impact of economic crises. The overemphasis on individualised victims and solutions to the COLC potentially distorts public understanding of the issue and minimizes the role of the government in tackling the problem. Furthermore, Iyengar and Nisbet's work suggests that framing poverty through episodic news coverage is likely to lessen support for government intervention. This is the case even when the news coverage is sympathetic to people living in poverty. A deeper understanding of the impact of news coverage of the COLC could be achieved through audience research that uses focus groups to better understand the audience reactions to this news coverage as this would allow for a better understanding of the wider impact this news coverage has on public perceptions of the crisis.

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