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Social media opposition to the 2022/2023 UK nurse strikes

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Abstract

Previous research has established that the success of strikes, and social movements more broadly, depends on their ability to garner support from the public. However, there is scant published research investigating the response of the public to strike action by healthcare workers. In this study, we address this gap through a study of public responses to UK nursing strikes in 2022–2023, using a data set drawn from Twitter of more than 2300 publicly available tweets. We focus on *negative* tweets, investigating *which societal discourses social media users draw on to oppose strike action by nurses*. Using a combination of corpus-based approaches and discourse analysis, we identified five categories of opposition: (i) discourse discrediting nurses; (ii) discourse discrediting strikes by nurses; (iii) discourse on the National Health System; (iv) discourse about the fairness of strikers' demands and (v) discourse about potential harmful impact. Our findings show how social media users operationalise wider societal discourses about the nursing profession (e.g., associations with care, gender, vocation and sacrifice) as well as recent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic to justify their opposition. The results also provide valuable insights into misconceptions about nursing, strike action and patient harm, which can inform strategies for public communication.

KEYWORDS
antistrike discourse, discourse analysis, healthcare, nurses, social media, strikes, United Kingdom

1 | INTRODUCTION

A strike is a collective and temporary withdrawal of work that makes some type of demand or raises grievances (Hyman, 1989). Strikes by health workers have been remarkably common: over the last few years alone, strikes have been reported in almost every country, pointing to serious concerns and healthcare workers' frustration regarding workload, occupational hazards, inadequate renumeration and resourcing and other underlying system conditions (Brophy et al., 2022). These issues have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, unprecedented workforce exit and staff shortages, and the current cost-of-living crisis, leading to steep increases in protest activity worldwide (Sriram & Brophy, 2022). In the United Kingdom, around 500,000 workers, including employees of the state-run National Health Service (NHS), have been staging strikes since the summer of 2022, with the 6 February 2023 walkout of nurses and ambulance service staff being the biggest strike to date in the 75-year history of the NHS (Ravikumar & Thomas, 2023).

The present study focuses on the social media discourse surrounding the December 2022 to January 2023 nurse strikes in the United Kingdom. NHS nurses staged their first-ever strike on 15 December 2022 in a dispute over pay, staff shortages and working

conditions affecting patient safety. According to an estimate by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), up to 100,000 of their members walked out on the initial day of strike, which was followed by further action on 20 December 2022, and 18 and 19 January 2023 (Royal College of Nursing [RCN], 2023b). After talks between the government and union negotiators failed, nurses in England escalated their dispute by involving staff from accident and emergency departments, cancer wards and intensive care in a series of 48-h strikes in the early spring of 2023 (Helm, 2023). A further strike took place from 30 April to 1 May 2023 after members of the RCN rejected a new pay offer from the government. In May 2023, the RCN's 6-month strike mandate lapsed, and the union is currently holding a ballot on further industrial action in England.

Strike action, when carried out by healthcare workers, raises a series of questions related to the justification for strike action, its potential impacts, the motives of striking staff and more generally, the broader state of the healthcare systems in which strike action occurs. Previous research has established that the success of strikes, and social movements more broadly, depends to a great extent on their ability to garner support from third-party groups and the public (Kelloway et al., 2008; Naughton, 2022; Orazani et al., 2021). Public support may also influence the morale of strikers and impact the strike's duration (Kelloway et al., 2008). Data collected by public opinion companies in the United Kingdom suggest considerable support for the NHS nurse strikes, with two-thirds of the British public backing the strike action in the run-up to the first walkout on 15 December 2022; support has decreased since then, but around half of the public still favoured the strikes in February 2023 and placed the blame for their occurrence mostly with the government (Ipsos, 2023; Morris, 2022).

In public debates and across the academic literature, we often see two positions that speak to different elements of the problems that strikes raise. Those who see strike action in a favourable light tend to frame the problem more broadly, as one that involves shared responsibility, from the government and society more generally, with strikes raising fundamental questions about healthcare and the systems that support its delivery. Those who are opposed to strike action, however, frequently focus on the individual responsibility that health workers hold and the potential risks that such action poses to patients and healthcare systems (Essex & Weldon, 2022). Research has also shown that, in the context of the current strikes in the United Kingdom, public support also correlates with whether the strikers are perceived to be over- or underpaid, as well as the contribution that they are seen to be making to society (McDonnell, 2023).

This study investigates the social media discourse about the UK nurse strikes using a corpus of Twitter data assembled from tweets published between 1 October 2022 (prestrike) and 31 January 2023 (following the first wave of strikes). The focus in this paper is on social media activity from those opposing the strike action and the discourses that they have articulated to justify their position. By capturing, classifying and analysing this data, we aim to address the following research question:

> What are the societal discourses that social media users draw on to oppose strike action by nurses?

Understanding discourses that circulate on social media, particularly in relation to opposition to strike action, is crucial for several reasons. First, from the perspective of the nursing profession and those striking, this study provides valuable insights into particular misconceptions about strike action. It can also assist in identifying reasons for and against strike action, and consequently, inform strategies for public communication about healthcare strikes. Second, from research and social media studies perspectives, this study lays the foundation for future, larger-scale exploration of public discourse and sentiment towards health worker strikes through the identification of the diverse layers and themes of opposition. At present, the social media users who engage with hashtags that researchers can potentially use to track and extract social media content related to the strikes (e.g., #FairPayforNursing, #RCNStrike, #NHSStrikes, #NursesStrikes) are overwhelmingly in favour of strikes. Relying primarily on these hashtags for a sentiment analysis, for example, would render much of the antistrike sentiment on social media invisible. Relevant hashtags and keywords used by those opposing the strikes are currently underresearched and poorly understood. This study fills some of this gap by providing an outline and classification of the main antistrike discourses in relation to UK nurse strike action on social media, as well as related keywords, which we expect will be leveraged in prospective studies about health worker strikes in the United Kingdom and beyond.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW: STRIKES, SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

There is a relatively small body of published research investigating social media responses to strike action by healthcare workers, even though a platform such as Twitter has been widely used as a tool for health research since the 2010s (Sinnenberg et al., 2017). A search of the literature revealed only two published research studies that has focussed on the social media representation of nurse strikes: Naughton (2022), who analysed messages of support on Twitter and in newspapers for the national nursing strike in Ireland in 2019, and Soine and Schneider (2022), who traced the media representation of gender and labour in the 1984–2014 nursing strikes in the United States using newspaper, television, online news and social media data.

Public responses to nurse strikes have received scant attention also in the research literature focused on mainstream media discourses. A small-scale empirical study in this area was presented by Henttonen et al. (2013), who investigated the discursive construction of nurses' industrial action in opinion texts published by one of Finland's largest newspapers following a threat of mass resignation by Finnish nurses in 2007. This research is also among the very few studies that explored, at least in part, opposition to strike action by healthcare workers or antistrike discourses in mainstream

or social media. Most authors in this area of work have focussed primarily on other topics, including evaluating communication strategies deployed by strike leaders and how these shaped public discourse on the strikers' demands, healthcare reforms and strike action in the sector more broadly (Kowalchuk, 2011; Kubisa, 2016; McKeown, 2009; Polak et al., 2022). Collectively, these studies confirm that strikes by healthcare workers can incite strong public reactions and response, where the profession as well as strikers' rights, responsibilities and demands are increasingly framed using polarising discourse. Social media polarisation—understood as the emergence of conflicting attitudes about events on social media platforms owing to selective online exposure—is a well-documented phenomenon across different sociocultural contexts and topics (Gupta et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023), but it is a largely under-researched area in the strike literature, particularly when it comes to framing and argumentative strategies, and the processes by which 'bubbles' of like-minded social media users adopt, share and reinforce antistrike(r) discourses.

The broader literature on strike action by public sector employees and key workers has also highlighted several other factors that are likely to shape social media discourse about healthcare workers' strikes. These include the nature of mainstream media coverage (Greenberg, 2004; Martin, 2005; Şen, 2019), the definitional role of governments and politicians in news and social media reporting of strikes (Greenberg, 2004), the political affiliation of (social) media users (Ramírez-Vallejo & Santamaría-Velasco, 2022), and finally, the wider societal discourse and ideals associated with different public-facing professions (Henttonen et al., 2013). Overall, the mainstream media discourse as well as governments tend to focus on the negotiations and the strike's impact on the public—particularly the disruption and potential harm caused to citizens—rather than on the underlying issues and the reasons for strike. There is also evidence that political affiliation can affect the endorsement of (anti) strike discourses, with those on the political right less likely to support strikes or believe that they are justified than those on the political left.

Wider societal discourses also play an important role. Some professions, particularly within the public sector and healthcare, are often discursively constructed in a way that confers members of this profession certain identifies, virtues and responsibilities. Nursing is a classic example of this, as societal discourses about the profession often perpetuate 'culturally feminine meanings of nurturing, caring and comforting' (Henttonen et al., 2013, p. 56), and in the process, marginalise the knowledge, skills and experience that are essential to the job (Fealy et al., 2018). The endurance of healthcare workers on the Covid-19 frontline has also given rise more recently to the 'nurse-as-hero' and 'nurse-as-angel' discourses; while these tend to gather societal support and sympathy for the profession, they also potentially diminish nurses' ability to advocate for fair pay and safe working conditions as a result of the expectations of heroism, caring and sacrifice imposed upon them by the mainstream media and the public (Boulton et al., 2022; Mohammed et al., 2021).

3 | METHODS

This study uses a corpus of Twitter data assembled from tweets published by members of the public between 1 October 2022 and 31 January 2023. The corpus was built manually based on the screening and analysis of more than 2300 publicly available tweets posted in response to 20 social media triggers that were trending on Twitter in the lead-up, unfolding and escalation of the strikes. The triggers included tweets from different UK news organisations from across the political spectrum about the NHS nurse strikes, tweets from prominent government and opposition politicians expressing endorsement or opposition to the strikes, and direct calls for support on Twitter from nursing unions and nurses themselves. The triggers were used to identify relevant tweets for the corpus-building, and they were not included in the analysis. As part of the initial screening, all responses expressing solidarity with the strikers or support for their actions and demands were removed from the data set. The remaining data were then further processed and reduced by eliminating responses that were not directly associated with the strikes (e.g., tweets attacking the integrity of the media source/politician from the trigger) as well as tweets that included an expression of disapproval or public shaming but did not provide further context for the individual tweeter's stance (e.g., one-word tweets containing words like 'disgrace' or pictograms expressing disapproval such as thumbs-down signs and nauseated face/vomiting/angry face emojis). The final corpus comprised of 417 tweets, each posted from a unique social media account. The tweets contained on average 24 words, with 19 posts also containing videos and images, which were considered in the analysis. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the University of Greenwich, University Research Ethics Committee. Reference: UREB 22.2.6.9.

The tweets were explored using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. AntConc, a freeware corpus analysis tool (Anthony, 2022), was first used to search for patterns in text-based data and to analyse word frequencies and concordances within the corpus. Next, qualitative coding[1] was conducted to identify the discourses drawn upon by the tweeters to explain and justify their opposition to the nurses' strike. A discourse is understood in this article as 'a common set of assumptions that are typically taken for granted, invisible, or assumed' (Cheek, 2004, p. 1142). Discourses are not isolated entities, but rather entities that are intricately linked to their context of occurrence as well as 'to other discourses which were produced earlier […] are produced synchronically and subsequently' (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 277).

Using discourse analytic techniques, we developed a classification scheme that was used to explore the prominence of each discourse theme identified within our corpus as well as to code the data further to conduct correlation analyses using the psych (Revelle, 2022) and ggplot (Wickham, 2016) packages for R. Part of the results were analysed and visualised using RAWGraphs 2.0

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[1]For the coding scheme and relevant keywords, please refer to Supporting Information: Table S1.

(Mauri et al., 2017), an open-source software for data visualisation.[2] The analysis also showed that the collected tweets frequently referenced or responded to existing 'texts' (e.g., political and government discourse, mainstream media reporting, ideas circulating on social media), creating layers of meaning and connections with the broader political, health and sociocultural context, which are discussed in detail in Section 5.

4 | RESULTS

We identified 17 recurring discourse themes in the corpus, which were organised into five categories depending on their main target: (i) discourse discrediting nurses; (ii) discourse discrediting strikes by nurses; (iii) discourse on the National Health System (NHS); (iv) discourse revolving around the fairness of strikers' demands and (v) discourse centred on potential harmful impact. For a summary and relationship between the different discourse themes, please see the diagram in Supporting Information: Figure S1.

4.1 | Discourse discrediting nurses

The majority of the tweets opposing the strikes questioned nurses' motives for striking and considered them *disingenuous*. An important part of the mainstream media reporting on the strikes, as well as the broader societal discourse and calls for support, have focussed on the economic hardship experienced by nurses, for example, staff living on financial knife-edge and using food banks as a result of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis. Social media users opposing the strikes dismissed these reports of hardship as greatly exaggerated, fabrications or downright lies and portrayed nurses as greedy, lying and self-serving individuals. Social media users also questioned the idea that patient safety and unsafe working conditions were the motivation behind staff joining the strikes, and they used their tweets to call on nurses to admit their ulterior motives (e.g., money or bringing down the government).

Tweets opposing the strikes also questioned nurses' *work ethic*, by depicting nursing staff as lazy, negligent and in the most extreme examples, as deliberately harming and mistreating patients. Tweeters also made remarks in a sarcastic tone about nurses' chances of succeeding in a different industry if they were to leave the public sector, as well as their role and contributions to healthcare (e.g., with remarks about no one noticing their absence) to discredit the strikes. A related discourse theme, which frequently emerged in the corpus, was centred on nurses' *betrayal of the profession*. Social media users actively drew on some well-worn gendered discourses of the profession, which portray nurses as caring, hardworking, sacrificing and outstanding moral subjects,

and they used these qualities to argue that strikers are unworthy of/betraying the nursing profession. There was also a perpetuation of the idea that nursing is a vocation, which was repeatedly brought up to undermine the professionalism of those workers who took part in the strikes.

The *Covid-19* pandemic and the heightened attention and scrutiny that the profession received in the past few years have also become reflected in antistrike discourses. Nurses were blamed on Twitter for being complicit in a variety of Covid-19-related measures (e.g., lockdowns, vaccination as a condition of deployment for healthcare workers), and hence their strike demands were not considered legitimate and worthy of support. Several tweets echoed Covid-19 conspiracy theories and vaccine misinformation as well. As part of the Covid-19 blame discourse, tweeters also constructed counternarratives to the nurse-as-hero and nurse-as-angel discourses, which were common representations of the profession during the pandemic, to oppose the strikes and question if and how deserving nurses were of the praise and public support received during the pandemic.

Finally, some of the tweets aimed at discrediting the strikes by targeting nurses relied on *choice* discourses. The theme of choice emerged in the corpus primarily in tweets arguing that nurses chose the profession—and are choosing to remain in it—in full knowledge of the salary and work conditions, and hence they have no right to complain or strike. Choice discourses were also actively drawn upon by those social media users who aimed to debunk the official discourse from the unions: that nurses were left with no other option than to strike over unfair pay and fears for patient safety.

4.2 | Discourse discrediting the strikes

We identified four discourse themes in this category, which included illegitimacy, public workers' right to strike, the political nature of strikes and general opposition to the unions/strikes. Those who considered the strikes *illegitimate* used in their social media discourse arguments focussed principally on the (in)validity of the ballot, and the 'thousands' of nurses who did not join the protests and performed their duties on strike days. To a lesser extent, it was also argued that the strikes were illegitimate because they lacked public support (a view that directly contradicted most public opinion polls conducted at the time of the strikes). There was also a broader discourse about healthcare workers' and public sector employees' *right to strike*, although it was among the less frequent discourse themes detected in the corpus. The arguments here often revolved around social media users respecting or appreciating the nursing profession, while at the same time putting in doubt workers' right to withhold labour because of the consequences that this may have in key sectors such as healthcare. In relation to the right-to-strike discourse in our corpus, it is important to note that many of the tweets analysed in the study were posted before the UK government

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[2]We protect the identity of the social media users whose tweets and responses we study by publishing only aggregate analyses and not data from individual users in its original format/wording.

announced the introduction of a new strikes (minimum service level) bill.[3] The bill and its mainstream media coverage have likely augmented the debate about healthcare workers' right to strike in social media interactions since our corpus was created.

Some social media users opposed to UK nurses' strikes also meant to shed light in their tweets on the hidden *political* nature of the strikes, by discursively linking them to groups on the political left (past and present) and, in some cases, by arguing that the strikes are part of a coordinated effort to overthrow the majority government of the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom. A few tweets also revealed a more general *antistrike and antiunion* sentiment, with the discourse in them revolving primarily around the critique of militant unions and their leaders and the unacceptability of strike action in any sector and under any conditions.

4.3 | Discourse on the NHS

A recurrent discourse used by social media users to oppose the strikes centred on the *wasteful management* of the NHS. The majority of the tweeters in this category were sympathetic towards nurses' pay rise demands; however, they were against the strikes because—as they claimed—there were sufficient resources within the system, but the NHS was wasting them on agency workers, managers and people in 'woke' jobs instead of salaries for staff in frontline services. NHS spending on agency staff to fill gaps in rotas has been widely discussed in the mainstream UK media, with social media users clearly engaging with this discourse through, among others, screenshots and links to published articles on the topic to justify their opposition. In their contributions to the debate in the online space, some social media users also expressed strong opposition to wasting NHS resources on 'overpaid' managers, and particularly 'woke' jobs and initiatives, examples of which included almost exclusively diversity and inclusion leads, lived experience director roles, translation services and BAME and LGBTQ+ support initiatives.

Other discursive themes in this category included *service level* and *Covid-19 blame*. Part of the social media users were unsupportive of the strikes because of the level of care provided by the NHS as a whole, with tweeters focussing mostly on current waiting times for GP and hospital appointments and value for money in the NHS—two topics that have also been widely discussed in the UK media and political discourse. Finally, like in the discourse discrediting nurses, some tweeters opposed the strikes because they directly blamed the NHS for Covid-19-related protective measures that they opposed, such as the nationwide lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 and restricted access to health services during the height of the pandemic.

4.4 | Discourse on strikers' demands

An important part of the social media discourse on Twitter also revolved around the legitimacy and fairness of strikers' demands,

particularly their right to a pay rise, which was downplayed by social media users through the deployment of *social comparison*, *affordability* and *fair compensation* arguments. Central to the first discourse theme were *comparisons* between the striking nurses and (i) other vulnerable and underprivileged groups who were presumably worse off than nursing staff in the United Kingdom; (ii) the society in general, where inflation and cost-of-living pressures were felt equally by all and (iii) the social media users themselves, who often made sarcastic comments about swapping their current salary and other benefits with NHS nurses anytime. The discourse drawing on social comparison often positioned the strikers—explicitly or implicitly—as entitled individuals, who, by insisting on their demands, ignore other underprivileged groups and un/underpaid workers such as pensioners, care workers and those employed in the transport and construction sectors. In some cases, tweeters self-identified as members of these groups; in other instances, the comparison was meant to prove that other occupational groups are objectively worse or deserve a pay rise even more than nursing staff, thus discrediting strikers' demands as unjust.

Tweets belonging to the second discourse theme, *affordability*, did not oppose nurses' right to a pay rise per se, but questioned either the rate of the increase demanded by the union or the availability of resources to fund it. From the very start of the strike action, the official political position by the ruling Conservative party was that nurses' pay demand was neither reasonable nor affordable in light of the country's economic situation; the same views were detected in our corpus with social media users reproducing various arguments made by government politicians throughout the strikes (e.g., that giving in to nurses' demands would stoke inflation and lead to higher taxes for other occupational groups).

Finally, the tweets grouped under the third theme, *fair compensation*, scrutinised nurses' current pay and benefits and constructed a discourse in which the strikers' present renumeration is either deemed fair or even excessive for the perceived contributions made to healthcare and society. In contrast to the first discourse theme, in the tweets centred on fair compensation, social media users did not resort to comparisons with other occupational and societal groups but rather constructed arguments around 'objective' indicators of income by stating the starting wage in the profession, average pay for experienced nurses and NHS pay scales and bands, among others. It is important to emphasise that in their assessment of the strikers' demands, those opposing the strikes focussed exclusively on pay rise demand in their online discourse, without engaging with the union's other disputes with the government over staff shortages and working conditions affecting patient safety.

4.5 | Discourse on potential impact

One of the main concerns associated with strikes in healthcare is their potential for harm, and this was clearly reflected in the social media discourse captured in our corpus. Much of the discussion

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[3] https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3396

generated by those opposing the strikes revolved around *risk to public*, with the degree of anticipated harm described in the tweets varying greatly, from generic risks to the public to imminent deaths. Those who focused in their discourse on serious harm often relied on intense and highly expressive language, including statements about nurses 'risking' or 'costing people's lives', having 'blood on their hands' and 'participating in (organised) murder'. In their risk-focussed discourse, social media users also repeatedly drew on the concepts of frailty and vulnerability to emphasise the harmful impacts of the strike and nurses' responsibility for patient care. While much of the discourse revolving around the impact of strikes focussed on the risks posed to the public, a small number of tweets also expressed opposition to nurses' strikes because of anticipated *personal consequences* (e.g., postponed or cancelled hospital appointments/treatment) and the *impact* that the strikes might have on an already struggling NHS.

4.6 | Theme prominence and relationships

Following the qualitative analysis and description of the data, we coded each tweet for the presence (absence) of the 17 identified discursive themes to explore the prominence of each. The results are summarised in Supporting Information: Figure S2, which shows that the majority of the tweets in our data set questioned nurses' motives for striking and considered them *disingenuous*. *Risk to public* ranked second as a theme, followed by tweets that questioned nurses' *work ethic* to discredit the strikes and strikers. An important part of the social media discourse on Twitter also revolved around striking nurses' demands, particularly their right to a pay rise, which was connected with three, almost equally prominent themes: *social comparison*, *affordability* and *fair compensation*. The least prominent themes included *personal consequences*, the *impact* of strikes on the NHS, and nurses' *right to strike*.

To explore the co-occurrence of these themes, we carried out a correlation analysis. We utilised a tetrachoric correlation as our data were binary (coded on the presence/absence of a theme). The results of this are reported in Supporting Information: Figure S3 and Table S2. A higher correlation coefficient represents a greater co-occurrence of themes. For example, those who raised concerns about nurses' work ethic also often raised issues about the handling of the *Covid-19* pandemic or deployed discourses focused on *choice* and (unsatisfactory) *service level*. Similarly, those who raised concerns about the *impact* that a strike had *on the NHS* were more likely to also raise concerns about the *affordability* of a pay rise for nurses, how a strike would impact *service levels* and the *risks* that such action posed for the public. Overall, the themes that questioned the *impact* that strike action would have on the *NHS* and *service levels*, the *political nature* of strikes, nurses' *work ethic* and the *risks* that strike action posed for the public were most likely to co-occur with each other and other themes. A negative correlation coefficient indicated the extent to which themes were raised in isolation. For example, those who

asserted that nurses were being *disingenuous* in relation to striking often did so in isolation to other objections.

5 | DISCUSSION

The corpus of Twitter data analysed in this article illustrates the wide variety of discourses that social media users operationalised in the online space to cast doubt upon the fairness of nurses' labour dispute with the UK government and to express opposition to their strike action. The analysed tweets fell broadly into five categories, with discourse discrediting nurses being the most prominent in our data set. The tweets in this category criticised nurses' motives for undertaking strike action as well as their work ethic and betrayal of the profession, often by drawing on a broader caring discourse (Davies, 1995; Waerness, 1984). The analysed tweets often sustained and reproduced traditional gendered stereotypes related to the profession (e.g., nurses viewed as female, low skill, possessing traits such as caring, serving, vocation and sacrifice) (Teresa-Morales et al., 2022) when judging the legitimacy of strikes and the strikers' demands. In this regard, our findings are in agreement with previous studies exploring the discursive construction of nurses' strike action (Henttonen et al., 2013; Naughton, 2022; Soine & Schneider, 2022), which also detected views across different media that nurses on strike stain or betray the profession. To justify this position, nurses undertaking strike action have been called out for not acting in line with the traditional assumptions about their role, such as serving the needs of others, prioritising their patients over personal gains and showing empathy. The same themes were a frequent subject of debate in our corpus as well.

Furthermore, in the corpus, we also detected elements of the 'nurse-as-hero' discourse (Boulton et al., 2022; Mohammed et al., 2021), which was used in the analysed tweets to draw a contrast between the strikers and 'true' nurses portrayed as selfless and outstanding moral subjects (Mohammed et al., 2021), for whom sacrifice, heroism and public appreciation suffice as reward. By participating in the labour dispute with the government and the strikes, nurses showed—in social media users' view—that they were not the angels applauded by the public for their hard work and heroism during the Covid-19 crisis. Some Twitter users also reversed the 'nurse-as-hero' discourse, which was prominent in both mass media and the political discourse in the United Kingdom throughout the pandemic (BBC, 2020; Campbell & Elgot, 2021; Knowles, 2020), by discursively constructing the strikes as a neglect or betrayal of the public, who protected NHS nurses during the pandemic by making unprecedented sacrifices (e.g., losing their livelihood due to Covid-19 lockdowns or avoiding using NHS services to the detriment of their health). This latter view expressed in some of the analysed tweets is likely linked to the government's 2020 'Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives' public information campaign (HM Government, 2020), which became the mantra of the Covid-19 lockdowns in the United Kingdom (Kalocsányiová et al., 2021).

An important part of the social media discourse on Twitter also revolved around strikers' demands. Unions and nurses participating in the strike action have framed their demands in mainstream media outlets as essential to patient welfare, arguing that years of underresourcing and the government's refusal to offer nurses a fair pay rise have exacerbated the recruitment and retention crisis within the sector, putting patients' health and lives at risk (ITV, 2023; RCN, 2023a; Triggle, 2023). This framing of nurses' strike action is not uncommon: for instance, Polish nurses striking in January–June 2009 linked concerns about low wages to suboptimal working conditions and the general neglect of the healthcare system as well (Binkowska-Bury et al., 2013).

The strikers' framing focussed on patient welfare was explicitly rejected and countered by social media users opposing the strikes, who, in their online discourse, positioned nurses either as privileged workers who enjoy benefits unavailable to workers in other sectors or as individuals who selfishly pursue their own interests while ignoring the economic realities of the country and the hardship faced by other underprivileged groups. These arguments put forward by Twitter users were not dissimilar to those recorded by Henttonen et al. (2013) in their analysis of opinion texts published in print media about Finnish nurses' industrial action in 2007. Comparison of striking nurses' situation with those of other workers and social groups (social comparison) is a common discursive means utilised to discredit strike action, which was previously also documented in other case studies of media representations of nursing strikes across different countries including the United States, Ireland, Finland and Poland (Henttonen et al., 2013; Kubisa, 2016; Naughton, 2022; Soine & Schneider, 2022).

Interestingly, in some examples in our corpus, the Twitter discourse deploying social comparison also often featured nursing as a vocation rather than a skilled profession that requires extensive training, skills and specialised knowledge, thus constructing what Naughton (2022) termed a 'narrative of noncomparability' with better-paid positions requiring technical skills and training. According to Loughrey (2019), governments often benefit from this discourse as it justifies lower renumeration for nurses compared to other public sector workers in roles traditionally seen as requiring skilled work.

During the strikes, UK government officials consistently labelled nursing unions' pay demand as 'not affordable', citing budgetary constraints, the impact of Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine on the economy and worries about increased salaries in the sector stoking inflation as justification for their position (Ford, 2022; Morris, 2023). This discourse of (un)affordability was widely used by tweeters in our corpus as well. There have been several studies that found that Twitter users are, to a large degree, exposed only to opinions that agree with their own, that is, they are confined to their own online echo chambers, often formed along political lines (Bastos et al., 2018; Garimella et al., 2018). Because our corpus comprises single tweets from unique social media users, it is not suitable for exploring the emergence and dynamics of echo chambers in relation to the recent strikes in healthcare; this constitutes an important direction for future research. What the collected data confirm is that elements of official government discourse about (un)affordability were voiced and amplified in the social media debate contributions of those opposed to the nurse strikes. In some cases, social media users also created a discursive link between striking healthcare workers and far-left groups and portrayed the strikes as an attempt to overthrow the government, thus 'exposing' the strike's hidden political nature to other users in the online space.

One of the main concerns associated with strikes in healthcare, including nursing strikes, is their potential for harm, and this was clearly reflected in the discourse captured in our corpus. Risk to public ranked as the second most prominent theme in our data set, with social media users—particularly those whose tweets anticipated serious danger and harm to patients—deploying an intense and emotionally laden discourse, including arguments about nurses abandoning the frail and vulnerable, costing people's lives and being murderers or having blood on their hands. This is important for a number of reasons. First, while concerns about patient safety are often raised by governments, the public and health workers alike when discussing planned/ongoing industrial actions, the evidence on the effect of strikes on patient outcomes and overall healthcare delivery is mixed (Essex, Brophy, et al., 2023). Thus, there is no clear link between strike action and patient harm (Essex, Milligan, et al., 2022; Essex, Weldon, et al., 2022). This indicates a disconnect between perceptions of harm as a result of strikes and actual impact. Second, the harm-focussed discourses largely overlook 'the trade-off between the immediate consequences of striking and the accumulating patient safety risks related to chronic underinvestment in healthcare systems that led healthcare workers to strike in the first place' (Essex, Brophy, et al., 2023). Third, the arguments put forward by some social media users also revealed common misconceptions about healthcare strikes among parts of the public, most notably a lack of awareness about exemptions and healthcare services maintained during strike action. There are important lessons for communication about healthcare strikes in this, particularly in relation to a clear and balanced messaging about a strike's impact on patient care, the measures put in place to mitigate these, and the cost of failing to act regarding suboptimal working conditions, which will ultimately exacerbate harm to patient health and welfare.

Another recurrent discourse topic among social media users to justify opposition to the strikes was the wasteful management of the NHS. In contrast to the previous cases discussed, the majority of the tweeters deploying this discourse were sympathetic towards the nursing profession and strikers' demands. However, they did not perceive the strikes as the right course of action and placed all the blame with the NHS, which, in their view, has wasted key resources on agency workers, managerial positions and people in woke jobs instead of properly renumerating frontline staff such as nurses. Interestingly, almost all examples of woke and unnecessary roles referenced by social media users in their contributions were diversity- and inclusion-oriented initiatives (e.g., BAME and LGBTQ+ support activities, translation services, diversity and inclusion leads and lived experience director roles). This hints at an overlap with the 'antiwoke culture war' discourse in the United Kingdom,

which positions social justice struggles like antiracism and pro-LGBTQ rights as extremist, deviant and/or abnormal (Cammaerts, 2022; Davies & MacRae, 2023).

Our results also showed that some of the social media discourse around strikes overlapped with and propagated Covid-19 conspiracy theories and vaccine misinformation. There was also a broader Covid-19 blame discourse circulating on Twitter, in which nurses, health professionals and the NHS were explicitly positioned against the public, which—as claimed—now suffers the devastating knock-on effects of the pandemic. In this discourse, Covid-19 measures such as social distancing and lockdowns were portrayed as being necessary principally for easing healthcare workers' workload rather than for halting the spread of the virus, avoiding the collapse of health services and saving lives, which was the official position and discourse of the UK government at the height of the pandemic (HM Government, 2020).

In our analysis, we also examined the relationships between different discourse themes that arose in the data. We found some correlations (e.g., affordability and impact on the NHS; or the political nature of strikes and general antistrike/antiunion sentiment), but overall, there were no clear patterns in the deployment of two or more discourse themes within single tweets that we could further explore. What we also found surprising was the lack of tweets explicitly questioning nurses' right to strike (Essex, Burns, et al., 2023). There may be several reasons for this. First, as noted above, many of the tweets included in the corpus were posted before the UK government announced its new controversial strikes bill, which mandates minimum service levels for critical industries such as health, thus undermining workers' ability to take strike action across different sectors. The bill and its mainstream media coverage have likely augmented the social media debate about healthcare workers' freedom to strike since our corpus was created. Second, one could similarly argue that some of the other discourse themes (e.g., risk to public) contain an implicit assumption that nurses have no right/ should not be legally allowed to strike because of the critical nature of the services that they provide and the risks that any strike action from their side could pose to the public. Finally, some of the tweets drawing on choice discourses—that is, nurses chose the profession in full knowledge of the salary and work conditions—were likely also underpinned by implicit assumptions about right to strike. Choice discourses were also actively deployed by social media users who aimed to debunk the official discourse from the unions, that nurses were left with no other option than to strike over unfair pay and fears for patient safety (ITV, 2023; RCN, 2023a; Triggle, 2023).

There are several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting our findings. First, our analysis is limited to data extracted from Twitter users; it is possible that research on other platforms would have exposed different discursive patterns, given the varying demographics of social media use (Hargittai, 2020). Second, the interactive potential of social media discourse and communication was not addressed within this study; our corpus was limited to single tweets from unique social media accounts and as such was not suitable for fully exploring the dynamics of social media

dialogue around nurses' strike action. Finally, our results are not necessarily applicable to other nurse strike contexts, even though we have observed some important similarities with case studies conducted in Canada, Finland and Ireland (Boulton et al., 2022; Henttonen et al., 2013; Naughton, 2022).

6 | CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the social media discourse about UK nurse strike action that took place during the winter of 2022/2023, when a wave of industrial actions swept the country, with NHS workers, teachers, civil servants, transport workers and other public sector staff withdrawing their work in protest over staff shortages, pay and work conditions. The focus in this paper was on Twitter activity from those opposing nurses' strikes and the discourses that they had articulated to justify their position. Strikes by healthcare workers often prompt polarising debate and public support for them may easily wane (or be even reversed). Social media analysis is increasingly used to gauge public sentiment, but the antistrike discourse on social media platforms is usually fragmented and harder to locate and retrieve for analysis than posts of support. Hence, the main contribution of this study lies in our outline, classification and detailed analysis of the main antistrike discourses in relation to UK nurses' strike action.

The strengths of the study include the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches for analysis, the richness of the documented data and the provision of the broader, societal context through which we examined current discourses and how they arose from both past associations about the profession (links to themes such as caring, gender, vocation and sacrifice) as well as recent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the soaring UK cost of living. Our findings add to the literature on the (social) media representation of the nursing profession and healthcare workers' strikes and how these potentially impact and complicate nurses' ability to advocate for fair pay and adequate working conditions.

The findings can also inform future organising to garner and sustain public support for strike action by nurses and healthcare workers more broadly, especially in a prolonged and escalating dispute. For instance, based on our results, one may speculate that those members of the public who do not oppose nurses' right to a pay rise per se (e.g., authors of tweets grouped under the discourse themes of affordability and wasteful management) may find messaging that rebuts arguments about the cost of a pay rise more persuasive, particularly if this shows that the cost is relatively small compared to other government spending within health and across sectors. Similarly, those focused on risk and harm discourses may find their concerns addressed if public-facing communications about planned strikes are framed around the measures put in place to mitigate the impact of strikes in a particular context and the high health and human cost of failing to act and protest against suboptimal working conditions. This research may also be used to educate mainstream media about the multiple dimensions of 'harm' to health

systems, including harms done to patients through persistent underinvestment in healthcare infrastructures.

A greater focus on framing strategies by policy actors and the public regarding strike action could also deepen our understanding of how discourses are developed, identified and deployed to influence policy processes. Existing analysis on framing of strike action has underscored the power of heavily circulated narratives about patient harm and its impact on public perception. Future studies should include a systematic review of case studies and other literature surrounding strike discourses in the nursing profession. Our study also provides benchmark data for future large-scale studies using automated methods to extract data and categorise social media posts on healthcare workers' strike action to explore how strike discourses diffuse and evolve over time. A natural progression of this work would also be to compare (anti-)strike discourses circulating on social media in relation to recent strikes undertaken by other health professionals such as junior doctors or ambulance staff for a structured exploration of similarities and differences and the implications that these may have for public communication about strike action in the health sector. Future studies could also examine the issues highlighted in this paper within different theoretical contexts, utilising normative theories and frameworks, social conflict theory, theory on professional power and organising, and gender and feminist perspectives.

In the longer term, discourse research can shed important light on the ways patient-, practitioner- and health system-related issued are portrayed across different media spaces. This knowledge can be used to shape both public health campaigns and advocacy efforts: for example, in relation to adequate resourcing and healthcare funding. Understanding how discourse shapes public perception and policy decisions will support more effective advocacy efforts. Discourse research can also help identify health system-related misconceptions and devise targeted communication strategies to address these, which may ultimately strengthen nurses' ability to advocate for safe working conditions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared due to privacy and ethical restrictions. Coding notes and analysis that supports the findings of this study are available in the Supporting Information of this article.

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