TEMPORAL AND SEMANTIC PERSISTENCE OF COVID-19-RELATED LEXICAL UNITS IN ENGLISH, 2020–2026

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Abstract: This study examines the temporal development of 15 COVID-19-related lexical units in English digital discourse between 2020 and 2026 using the English Trends corpus in Sketch Engine. A diachronic corpus-based design combines annual and quarterly frequency analysis with targeted late-period concordance inspection for seven units. The results show that most items peaked during the early pandemic period, but their subsequent trajectories diverged substantially. Some coinages approached disappearance, whereas others retained residual or strong contemporary use. Pre-existing expressions likewise followed contrasting paths, including sharp decline, broader post-pandemic continuation, and continued growth. Qualitative evidence further demonstrates that continued corpus frequency does not necessarily indicate persistence of a COVID-specific meaning. The findings therefore support a distinction between quantitative lexical persistence and semantic or functional persistence and show that pandemic-associated vocabulary follows multiple post-emergence trajectories rather than a uniform pattern of decline.

Keywords: COVID-19 neologisms, diachronic corpus linguistics, Sketch Engine, lexical persistence, semantic shift, coronaspeak, English Trends.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an exceptional historical crisis that disrupted global communicative practices and left a substantial imprint on the English lexicon (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021, p. 24; Gustilo et al., 2021, p. 1). The rapid spread of the virus, coupled with digital and social media dissemination, triggered a rapid and highly visible expansion of specialised terms, often referred to as the "coronalexicon" (Gustilo et al., 2021, p. 1) or "coronaspeak" (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021, p. 29). This vocabulary served an important socio-pragmatic function by enabling speakers to negotiate and make sense of sudden changes in daily life (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021, p. 25; Gustilo et al., 2021, pp. 13–14).

Pandemic-related vocabulary is highly heterogeneous and cannot be treated as a single homogeneous set of neologisms. Previous research suggests that three analytically relevant groups can be distinguished: genuinely new COVID-era coinages created to name newly salient realities; pre-existing lexical units that were strongly popularised during the pandemic; and pre-existing expressions that underwent COVID-specific reactivation or semantic specialisation (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021, pp. 28, 34; Tallarico, 2023, p. 148). Distinguishing between these types is important for understanding how lexical items with different pre-pandemic histories develop after their period of greatest social salience.

Previous research has primarily focused on the emergence, formation, and early diffusion of pandemic-related vocabulary, including both newly coined forms and pre-existing expressions that gained heightened salience during COVID-19.

However, the longer-term post-pandemic development of this vocabulary remains comparatively underexamined. Investigating the trajectory of event-related vocabulary after the acute phase of a crisis is important for diachronic lexicology and theories of language change (Schmid, 2020, p. 152). Usage-based and sociolinguistic models indicate that lexical conventionality and institutionalisation are not necessarily permanent. Event-bound lexical items may undergo de-

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institutionalisation and decline when the extralinguistic conditions that supported their circulation lose communicative salience (Tallarico, 2023, p. 156).

Another important distinction is between continued formal occurrence and continued active use of a COVID-specific meaning. Corpus frequency alone may be insufficient for evaluating semantic persistence, making contextual evidence necessary for late-period interpretation (Nam, 2021, pp. 3, 22).

Against this background, three issues remain particularly relevant: the systematic comparison of genuine COVID-era coinages with pre-existing pandemic-associated expressions; variation in temporal trajectories after the initial pandemic peak; and the relationship between quantitative lexical persistence and continued COVID-specific semantic use.

To address these issues, the present study examines the diachronic development of 15 selected COVID-19-related lexical units in the English Trends (2014–today) corpus in Sketch Engine across the period 2020–2026. It combines quantitative analysis of temporal frequency patterns with qualitative late-period concordance evidence where such data are available, allowing formal lexical persistence to be distinguished from continued COVID-related use.

The study is structured around the following three research questions:

RQ1. What temporal frequency patterns do the selected COVID-19-related lexical units display in English Trends between 2020 and 2026?

RQ2. How do the temporal trajectories differ between genuine COVID-era coinages and pre-existing lexical units that were popularised, reactivated, or semantically specialised during the pandemic?

RQ3. To what extent does late-period lexical persistence correspond to continued COVID-related use in the units for which qualitative concordance evidence is available?

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic produced a rapid and highly visible wave of lexical innovation in English. The specialised vocabulary associated with the crisis has been described as the "coronalexicon" (Gustilo et al., 2021, p. 1) and "coronaspeak" (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021, p. 29), reflecting the need to name unfamiliar medical, social, technological, and behavioural realities under intense communicative pressure (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021, p. 29).

Yet this vocabulary was not uniform in origin. Some expressions were newly coined in response to the pandemic, whereas others had existed before 2020 and gained renewed prominence, altered meanings, or new communicative functions during the crisis (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021, p. 34; Gustilo et al., 2021, p. 1). For diachronic analysis, the distinction matters because the later history of a newly created form need not resemble that of an older expression temporarily made salient by an exceptional social event.

Much of the early research concentrated on word-formation patterns. Blending and compounding were particularly productive, generating forms such as covidiot, quarantini, coronacation, and maskne (Roig-Marín, 2021, pp. 31, 36–37). Other formations emerged around digitally mediated practices, including Zoom fatigue and Zoombombing / Zoom bombing (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021, pp. 30, 39), while long COVID denotes COVID-19 with long-term symptoms (Ma'touq & Yasin, 2025, p. 708).

The productivity of recurring bases and splinters also shaped this lexical expansion. Forms such as corona-, covid-, and -cation supported analogical coinage, with -cation, for example, functioning as a splinter in formations such as coronacation (Roig-Marín, 2021, p. 38). The base corona likewise became highly productive as a modifier in pandemic-related formations (Roig-Marín, 2021, pp. 37–38). Beyond naming new realities, many such items also carried expressive, humorous, or coping functions during a period of collective uncertainty (Linok et al., 2025, p. 99).

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At the same time, lexical change during COVID-19 was not confined to new word creation. Infodemic, for instance, predates the pandemic and has been traced to 2003, but it gained renewed circulation during COVID-19 (Gustilo et al., 2021, pp. 3, 8). Other established expressions, including new normal and social distancing, also acquired heightened salience or more specialised pandemic-related uses (Gustilo et al., 2021, pp. 7–8; Nam, 2021, p. 20). The broader literature points to several pathways of pandemic-related lexical change: coinage, popularisation, reactivation, and semantic specialisation.

The longer-term fate of newly created or newly salient forms can be examined through theories of diffusion, conventionalisation, institutionalisation, and lexicalisation. Schmid's Entrenchment-and-Conventionalization Model treats linguistic development as an interaction between social conventionalisation and cognitive entrenchment, both of which are strengthened through repeated usage events (Schmid, 2020, pp. 6, 140).

Within this framework, diffusion describes the spread of an innovation across speakers, communities, regions, and communicative settings, while usualization concerns the establishment of recurrent choices and form–meaning associations within a speech community (Schmid, 2020, pp. 124–125, 144, 150). Repeated exposure and use may then contribute to routinisation and schematisation at the cognitive level (Schmid, 2020, pp. 226–227). Such processes provide a useful background for understanding why some highly visible event-related expressions extend beyond their original context while others do not.

Hohenhaus (2005) approaches a related problem through the distinction between institutionalization and lexicalization. Institutionalization concerns the social acceptance and currency of a lexical innovation, whereas lexicalization involves its development into a more fixed element of the lexicon, sometimes accompanied by reduced morphological transparency or greater semantic idiosyncrasy (Hohenhaus, 2005, pp. 353, 356). His distinction between nonce-formations and neologisms is equally relevant: short-term visibility does not necessarily mean that an expression has become firmly established (Hohenhaus, 2005, pp. 363–365).

This is particularly pertinent to event-related vocabulary. Some forms may circulate intensively while the social conditions that motivate them remain highly salient, yet lose currency once those conditions change (Tallarico, 2023, p. 156). In usage-based terms, declining repetition can weaken both social conventionality and cognitive entrenchment; Hohenhaus (2005, p. 362) describes a related process as de-institutionalisation, while Tichý (2021, p. 102) treats lexical obsolescence as part of broader diachronic change.

Renouf's account of lexical life cycles likewise allows for divergent outcomes: newly salient forms may become established, decline, disappear, or later be reactivated under different socio-historical conditions (Renouf, 2013, p. 181). Empirical research on pandemic vocabulary supports this variability. In a study of COVID-related terms in the French press, Tallarico (2023, pp. 151–152) identifies several trajectories, including disappearance, near-disappearance, dramatic decline, stability, and increasing frequency.

Frequency is an important indicator of lexical diffusion and continued visibility, but it cannot by itself establish whether a form remains active in the same semantic or communicative role. Nam (2021, pp. 3, 22) notes that web-derived frequency data can be unstable and may capture short-lived salience rather than durable lexical establishment. For this reason, quantitative evidence benefits from contextual and qualitative interpretation rather than being treated as a sufficient criterion in isolation.

Tallarico's (2023, pp. 151–156) diachronic analysis illustrates the same point from a temporal perspective. High early frequency was followed by very different outcomes across the items examined: some disappeared, others declined sharply, while a smaller number remained stable or increased. Initial prominence, therefore, does not necessarily predict subsequent lexical survival. A further difficulty arises when the lexical form itself predates the event under investigation. Continued

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occurrence of the same string may reflect broader or earlier meanings even after its pandemic-specific use has weakened. Nam (2021, pp. 8, 20) and Renouf (2013, pp. 180–181) both emphasise the importance of contextual evidence in tracing semantic change. Simply counting formal occurrences may overestimate the persistence of an event-specific sense.

The problem is not restricted to pre-existing expressions. A genuinely new coinage may remain visible in later corpora because it is quoted, discussed historically, or mentioned metalinguistically even when active referential use has declined. Tallarico (2023, p. 156) draws attention to such late-stage behaviour, while Hohenhaus's (2005, p. 362) discussion of de-institutionalisation provides a wider theoretical context for the loss of communicative currency.
For diachronic analysis, formal survival and continued event-related use must therefore be evaluated as separate dimensions.

Research on COVID-19-related vocabulary has documented its early morphological creativity, semantic adaptation, and rapid diffusion (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021), while more recent diachronic work has identified contrasting post-emergence trajectories, including decline, disappearance, stability, and continued growth (Tallarico, 2023).

However, the longer-term development of pandemic-associated vocabulary remains comparatively underexamined, particularly across an extended post-pandemic period and in comparisons between genuine COVID-era coinages and pre-existing expressions that were popularised, reactivated, or semantically specialised during the pandemic.

A further gap concerns the relationship between late corpus frequency and continued COVID-specific use. These gaps are addressed through a diachronic analysis of 15 COVID-19-related lexical units from 2020 to 2026, supplemented by concordance evidence where available.

Methods

1.Corpus, Study Period, and Lexical Sample

A diachronic corpus-based design combines quantitative frequency analysis with targeted qualitative concordance inspection. Annual and quarterly data are used to reconstruct temporal trajectories between 2020 and 2026; where available, late-period concordances indicate whether surviving occurrences represent active contemporary use, retrospective or metalinguistic reference, or broader non-COVID meanings.
This combination follows a general triangulation principle in corpus-based neology: frequency evidence benefits from contextual validation when lexical establishment or semantic persistence is assessed (Nam, 2021). Nam's full multi-source model is not implemented here, as user-perception and dictionary-inclusion data lie outside the empirical scope.

The analysis is based on English Trends (2014–today) in Sketch Engine and covers 2020–2026. The corpus was accessed on 31 August 2026. Since 2026 was incomplete at the time of access, its values are interpreted cautiously rather than treated as fully comparable with completed calendar years.

For each lexical unit, raw frequency and relative frequency were recorded. Relative frequency was measured as the number of occurrences per million tokens and provided the principal basis for diachronic comparison, while raw counts were retained for descriptive purposes. Peak year and peak quarter were also identified; the latter corresponds to the quarter with the highest relative frequency.The analysis is intended to describe temporal development within the study period rather than reconstruct complete lexical histories or establish absolute first attestations.

The dataset contains 15 COVID-19-related lexical units: covidiot, coronacation, maskne, quarantini, quaranteen, coronapocalypse, doomscrolling, Zoom fatigue, Zoombombing / Zoom bombing, vaccine passport, long COVID, infodemic, social bubble, new normal, and social distancing. The initial candidate list was compiled from COVID-19-related lexical items discussed in

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the studies reviewed above and then checked in English Trends. Fifteen units were retained as a purposive analytical sample representing three different lexical histories: COVID-era coinages, pre-existing forms strongly popularised or functionally expanded during the pandemic, and pre-existing expressions with COVID-specific reactivation or semantic specialisation. Selection was not based on a minimum-frequency threshold: rare but analytically relevant formations were retained where their temporal development could be traced. The resulting sample is not intended to represent the entire COVID-19 lexicon.

The umbrella term COVID-19-related lexical units is used because the sample includes both pandemic-era coinages and forms that existed before 2020 but acquired increased salience or altered functions during COVID-19. For comparison, the items were divided into three operational categories. Status A comprises genuine COVID-era coinages: covidiot, coronacation, maskne, quarantini, quaranteen, coronapocalypse, Zoom fatigue, Zoombombing / Zoom bombing, and long COVID. Status B includes pre-existing units strongly popularised or functionally expanded during the pandemic: doomscrolling, infodemic, social distancing, and vaccine passport. Status C contains pre-existing expressions with COVID-specific reactivation or semantic specialisation: new normal and social bubble.

This A/B/C distinction is specific to the present study and is not presented as an established three-part taxonomy from a single prior source.

2. Quantitative Temporal Analysis

The broad trajectory of each unit was reconstructed from annual raw and relative frequencies and from peak-quarter and peak-year values. Classification remained descriptive and was based on the recorded frequency series rather than predetermined numerical thresholds.

The descriptive classification is consistent with previous diachronic work showing that event-related vocabulary may follow contrasting paths such as disappearance, decline, stability, or growth (Tallarico, 2023). The labels retained in the master dataset include near disappearance, strong decline with different degrees of residual persistence, moderate decline with contemporary lexical persistence, and continued growth.

Where no qualitative record was available, the preliminary quantitative trajectory was retained. Where concordance analysis had been completed, the qualitatively refined interpretation took priority.

Two dataset-specific decisions should be noted. Zoombombing / Zoom bombing is treated as one lexical unit for classification, but its two spelling series are preserved separately and are not summed. In addition, the 2024 raw frequency for quarantini was reconstructed arithmetically in the source dataset; the corresponding relative frequency was not directly visible and therefore remains unavailable.

3. Qualitative Concordance Analysis

Only units with individual late-period records in the master dataset underwent qualitative inspection. Contexts were classified by dominant discourse function. Active use referred to direct referential use of the lexical unit in a contemporary context; for pre-existing expressions, this category could include active broader non-COVID use where the contextual meaning had moved beyond the pandemic-specific sense. Retrospective use referred to occurrences explicitly referring back to the COVID-19 pandemic or related earlier events, whereas metalinguistic use involved discussion, quotation, naming, definition, or explanation of the lexical form itself. Other was reserved for contexts that could not be reliably assigned to the first three categories, including unclear, figurative, or extended uses; the table retains informative sublabels within these four categories.

Sketch Engine's "Only 1st hit in document" filter was applied to limit each source to a single concordance result. For the six frequent units, the first 40 results in the displayed concordance order

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were inspected for each year, without randomisation or additional re-sorting. Qualitative evidence was thus collected for doomscrolling, Zoom fatigue, long COVID, social bubble, new normal, and infodemic in both 2025 and 2026. Because covidiot was considerably rarer, all available records were examined: 14 from 2025 and five from 2026.No qualitative interpretation was inferred where no individual record existed. In particular, the master dataset contains no qualitative concordance data for quaranteen.

The analysis distinguishes quantitative lexical persistence, defined as the continued occurrence of a lexical string after its peak, from semantic or functional persistence, defined as continued active use of the COVID-related meaning or communicative function associated with that form. Because formal frequency and semantic continuity may diverge, frequency was interpreted alongside late-period concordance evidence where available. This procedure distinguishes formal survival from active, retrospective, metalinguistic, or broader non-COVID use.

Results

1. Temporal Distribution and Trajectory Patterns

Across the 15 COVID-19-related lexical units, frequency was strongly concentrated in the early pandemic period, although not uniformly. Eleven items reached their highest annual relative frequency in **2020**, and the same number reached their quarterly maximum in **2020 Q2 or Q3** (Table 1). An early pandemic peak followed by decline was therefore the dominant trajectory.

Table 1. Temporal characteristics of the 15 COVID-19-related lexical units

Lexical unit	Status	Peak quarter	Peak year	Peak-year RF	Final temporal trajectory
covidiot	A	2020 Q2	2020	0.22	Strong decline with limited residual active use
coronacation	A	2020 Q2	2020	<0.01	Near disappearance
maskne	A	2020 Q3	2020	0.15	Strong decline with residual persistence
quarantini	A	2020 Q2	2020	0.08	Strong decline with residual persistence
quaranteen	A	2020 Q2	2020	0.03	Near disappearance
coronapocalypse	A	2020 Q2	2020	0.02	Near disappearance
doomscrolling	B	2026 Q2	2026	0.72	Continued growth with active contemporary use beyond the pandemic context
Zoom fatigue	A	2021 Q2	2021	0.26	Strong decline with substantial residual active use
Zoombombing / Zoom bombing	A	2020 Q2	2020	0.26 / 0.11	Strong decline with residual persistence
vaccine passport	B	2021 Q2	2021	7.88	Strong decline with residual persistence
long COVID	A	2022 Q2/Q3	2022	5.71	Moderate decline with strong contemporary lexical persistence

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infodemic	B	2020 Q2	2020	0.36	Strong decline with sustained active use and broader post-pandemic application
social bubble	C	2020 Q3	2020	0.37	COVID-specific sense near disappearance / predominantly retrospective survival; lexical string continues in broader non-COVID meanings
new normal	C	2020 Q2	2020	12.59	Near disappearance of COVID-specific use with strong non-COVID lexical persistence
social distancing	B	2020 Q2	2020	86.66	Strong decline with residual persistence

Note. Status A = genuine COVID-era coinages; Status B = pre-existing lexical units strongly popularised or functionally expanded during COVID-19; Status C = pre-existing expressions with COVID-specific reactivation or semantic specialisation. The 2026 corpus data were incomplete because the corpus was accessed on 31 August 2026. RF = relative frequency, measured as occurrences per million tokens.

The four exceptions peaked later: *Zoom fatigue* and *vaccine passport* in **2021**, *long COVID* in **2022**, and *doomscrolling* in **2026** for both its highest recorded annual and quarterly values. The last case should be interpreted cautiously because the 2026 corpus data were incomplete at the time of access.

Peak magnitudes varied substantially across the sample. High-frequency expressions such as *social distancing* and *new normal* reached much larger relative-frequency peaks than short-lived formations such as *coronacation* and *coronapocalypse*. Peak size, however, did not determine subsequent persistence: both high- and low-frequency items could decline sharply, while a smaller number showed delayed or continuing trajectories.

Overall, the peak distribution supports a broad distinction between an early-pandemic majority and a smaller group of later-peaking or continuing units.

The frequency series reveal several distinct post-pandemic pathways rather than a single pattern of lexical survival or disappearance (Table 1).

The most extreme form of decline is represented by *coronacation*, *quaranteen*, and *coronapocalypse*, all of which approach disappearance in the later period. A larger group—*maskne*, *quarantini*, *Zoombombing* / *Zoom bombing*, *vaccine passport*, and *social distancing*—shows strong decline but retains some residual corpus presence.

Other units demonstrate more substantial persistence. *Covidiot* survives only to a limited degree, whereas *Zoom fatigue* retains considerably more active late-period use despite a marked decline from its peak. *Infodemic* also declines strongly in normalised frequency but continues to appear in active contemporary contexts.

Two items stand apart from the dominant contraction pattern. *Long COVID* shows a later peak followed by a more moderate decline and continued lexical activity, while *doomscrolling* exhibits continued growth rather than post-pandemic decline. The Status C expressions require separate qualitative consideration.

2. Trajectories by Lexical Status

Comparison by lexical status reveals substantial internal variation within all three categories.

Status A shows the widest internal contrast, ranging from near disappearance among short-lived coinages to substantial contemporary persistence in cases such as Zoom fatigue and long COVID.

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Status B is similarly heterogeneous, ranging from strong post-peak decline to continued growth, most clearly illustrated by doomscrolling. The two Status C items illustrate a different mechanism, in which formal persistence exceeds persistence of the pandemic-specific semantic activation. Taken together, the status comparison suggests that lexical origin does not determine a single post-pandemic outcome.

3. Late-Period Lexical and Semantic Persistence

For seven units, qualitative concordance analysis provides a more precise view of late-period persistence (Table 2).

Table 2. Qualitative late-use profiles of the seven concordance-checked units

Lexical unit	2025 late-use profile	2026 late-use profile	Final qualitative interpretation
covidiot	Active: 3/14 (21.4%); retrospective/metalinguistic: 9/14 (64.3%); unclear: 2/14 (14.3%)	Active: 2/5 (40%); retrospective: 2/5 (40%); metalinguistic/quoted: 1/5 (20%)	Strong decline with limited residual active use
doomscrolling	Active: 40/40 (100%)	Active: 40/40 (100%)	Active contemporary use beyond the pandemic context
Zoom fatigue	Active: 29/40 (72.5%); retrospective: 8/40 (20%); metalinguistic: 3/40 (7.5%)	Active: 29/40 (72.5%); retrospective: 9/40 (22.5%); metalinguistic: 1/40 (2.5%); unclear: 1/40 (2.5%)	Strong decline with substantial residual active use
long COVID	Active: 36/40 (90%); technical/metalinguistic: 1/40 (2.5%); extended/other: 3/40 (7.5%)	Active: 35/40 (87.5%); retrospective: 2/40 (5%); technical/metalinguistic: 3/40 (7.5%)	Moderate decline with strong contemporary lexical persistence
infodemic	Active: 25/40 (62.5%); retrospective: 10/40 (25%); metalinguistic: 5/40 (12.5%)	Active: 27/40 (67.5%); retrospective: 9/40 (22.5%); metalinguistic: 4/40 (10%)	Strong decline with sustained active use and broader post-pandemic application
social bubble	General/non-COVID: 34/40 (85%); retrospective COVID-specific: 5/40 (12.5%); unclear: 1/40 (2.5%)	General/non-COVID: 33/40 (82.5%); retrospective COVID-specific: 7/40 (17.5%)	COVID-specific sense near disappearance / predominantly retrospective survival
new normal	General/non-COVID: 36/40 (90%); COVID/post-pandemic: 3/40 (7.5%); metalinguistic/title: 1/40 (2.5%)	General/non-COVID: 37/40 (92.5%); COVID/post-pandemic: 2/40 (5%); metalinguistic/title: 1/40 (2.5%)	COVID-specific use near disappearance; strong continued general use

Doomscrolling and *long COVID* show the strongest active persistence. All inspected late-period occurrences of *doomscrolling* were active contemporary uses, while *long COVID* remained overwhelmingly active in both 2025 and 2026. Continued lexical activity can accompany either quantitative growth or post-peak decline.

An intermediate pattern is evident for *Zoom fatigue* and *infodemic*. Both declined considerably in frequency, yet most inspected late-period contexts still reflected active contemporary use rather

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than purely retrospective or metalinguistic mention. Their lower frequency does not correspond to lexical disappearance.

Covidiot shows much weaker persistence. The available late-period sample is small, and retrospective or metalinguistic uses outnumber active uses, supporting its classification as a residual rather than strongly established contemporary item.

The clearest divergence between formal and semantic persistence appears in *social bubble* and *new normal*. In both cases, the overwhelming majority of 2025–2026 occurrences represent broader non-COVID uses, while explicitly pandemic-related uses are rare or mainly retrospective. Thus, continued string frequency would substantially overstate the persistence of the COVID-specific meaning.

Discussion

The wide contrast within Status A challenges the assumption that event-specific coinage is necessarily ephemeral. Some formations appear closely tied to temporary practices or cultural moments, but others can remain useful once the immediate crisis has passed. Long COVID is the clearest case in the present dataset: unlike many playful or situational coinages, it developed into a durable medical and public-health designation. Callard and Perego (2021, pp. 2–3) trace the movement of *long COVID* from a patient-generated hashtag into medical publications and policy discourse, documenting its early uptake beyond the community in which it emerged. Genuine pandemic-era origin alone does not predict lexical obsolescence.

Doomscrolling is notable because its later trajectory is no longer dependent on direct COVID-19 reference. Its persistence suggests that a pre-existing item strongly amplified during a crisis may become more firmly established when its meaning remains applicable to wider communicative concerns. *Infodemic* illustrates a related but less frequency-driven form of continuation: the term became less common than at its pandemic peak but remained functionally useful in broader discussions of information disorder.

For the Status C expressions, the temporary element was not the lexical form itself but its COVID-specific activation.

The asynchronous timing of peaks and decline indicates that post-pandemic lexical development proceeded along multiple pathways. Differences in post-pandemic trajectories may partly reflect **the communicative domains in which particular units remained useful. Expressions** tied to highly specific pandemic behaviours were more vulnerable to decline, whereas terms that remained applicable to medical, digital, or information-related contexts had greater opportunities for continued use. The present corpus data cannot establish these factors as causal explanations. Imam et al. (2026, p. 31) recommend longitudinal research on digital neologisms; the present analysis shows how this perspective distinguishes divergent post-pandemic outcomes.

The qualitative findings clarify why formal and semantic persistence must be treated separately. Growth, decline with continued active use, and formal survival through broader meanings all occur in the dataset. These contrasting patterns also have methodological implications: frequency alone can overestimate persistence when older or broader senses account for later occurrences, yet underestimate lexical continuity when an item remains actively used within a narrower domain. Contextual concordance evidence is particularly valuable here because, as Di Cristofaro (2024, p. 81) explains, concordances "allow to quickly 'get into' the data by showing qualitative aspects of a word through its use in context".

A related problem led Jiang et al. (2021, p. 5) to exclude ambiguous items from their Google Trends analysis: "the actual frequency of the neologisms cannot be teased apart from the usages of the conventionalized meaning". The present study retains pre-existing expressions but uses concordance evidence, where available, to distinguish their later contextual meanings.

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The findings are limited to a deliberately selected set of 15 COVID-19-related lexical units and should not be generalised automatically to the full pandemic lexicon. The study also relies on English Trends and covers 2020–2026; because the corpus was accessed on 31 August 2026, the final year is incomplete and its annual values require cautious interpretation.

The qualitative component introduces a further limitation. Late-period concordance records were available for only seven units, so distinctions between active, retrospective, metalinguistic, and broader non-COVID use cannot be extended to the remainder of the sample.

The analysis describes corpus trajectories rather than reconstructing absolute first attestations or complete lexical histories. The A/B/C framework is an operational device for comparing different types of pandemic-related lexical development rather than a universal taxonomy. Within these limits, combining diachronic frequency evidence with targeted concordance analysis distinguishes lexical survival from continued COVID-specific semantic persistence more precisely than frequency counts alone. For lexical documentation, this distinction also supports preserving information about meaning and context alongside wordforms (Ekanjume et al., 2026, p. 9).

Conclusion

The post-pandemic development of the selected COVID-19-related vocabulary was far from uniform. Eleven of the 15 units reached their highest annual relative frequency in 2020, but this early concentration did not produce a single pattern of decline. Some forms contracted rapidly and approached disappearance, whereas others remained active beyond the acute phase of the pandemic.

Lexical origin alone did not explain later survival: both genuine COVID-era coinages and pre-existing expressions displayed substantial internal variation. For the seven concordance-checked units, continued corpus presence did not necessarily imply continued COVID-specific use. Quantitative lexical persistence and semantic or functional persistence should therefore be treated as related but distinct dimensions.

These conclusions are limited to the selected set of 15 lexical units in English Trends, the incomplete 2026 data, and the availability of qualitative concordance records for only seven units.

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