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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

User Perceptions of Endearment *Love* and Regional Identity in Northern England

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the contemporary pragmatic scope of the endearment *love* and its indexical links with British regional identities as perceived by English language users in the United Kingdom. Popular metapragmatic stereotypes often associate the term with specific ‘northern’ English, working-class and White socio-ethnic identities, frequently framed through the lens of ‘northern friendliness’. However, this analysis suggests a more nuanced interactional reality in which the construction of *love* as an inward-looking cultural boundary marker may complicate its accessibility for newcomers seeking a marker of authentic local identity for place-making and belonging. Furthermore, the study proposes that the residual semantics of the term ([+female, +intimate, -authority]), alongside its specific sociodemographic indexicalities, might work against the wider geographical and social proliferation of the term, effectively restricting its use to the specific localised contexts and established social groups in which it now exists.

1 | Introduction

The article explores the current pragmatic scope of the endearment *love* and its links with British regional identities as understood by English language users in the United Kingdom (UK). Popular stereotypes of *love* associate the term and its use with specific regional (‘northern’ English), sometimes local (‘Sheffield’), socio-economic (‘working class’) and socio-ethnic (‘white’) identities, as well as with specific communicative stereotypes (‘northern friendliness’) (Beal 2004; Wales 2006; Culpeper and Gillings 2018). However, there is little empirical research to underpin these perceptions.

Research on nominal forms of address is dominated by a focus on ‘male’ forms, such as the English familiarisers *mate*, *bro* or *dude*. While address terms in general have important functions for human sociality as markers of social relationships and individuals’ rights and obligations in interaction, these male nominal address forms have been shown to be used to express affiliation with larger cultural, ethnic or national identity constructs and discourses (*dude* in American English or *mate* in Australian English; Kiesling 2004; Rendle-Short 2009, 2010; Alimoradian 2014). These sociocultural indexicalities can be strategically introduced by speakers in interaction in the pursuit of communicative goals. A related strand of research shows that familiarisers undergo pragmaticalisation, developing into affective–emphatic markers while simultaneously losing their deictic anchoring as well as their addressing function (e.g. Kleinknecht and Souza 2017), facilitating functional diversification for various interactional needs and adoption by expanding groups of users beyond

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the original constellation of use ‘by males for males’. The degree of pragmaticalisation of endearments and their indexical meaning potential are less well observed and understood.

Early accounts of endearments in Inner Circle varieties highlight several key characteristics: their semantic core as lexicalisations of the speaker’s affective stance, which metaphorically decreases social distance between speaker and addressee (Poynton 1990); their interpersonal core pattern as adult–child address and in intimate relationships (Braun 1988; Leech 1999); a gendered distribution, predominantly used by and to women (Leech 1999); a tendency for non-reciprocal use coinciding with asymmetrical role and power relationships (Wolfson and Manes 1980); and, because of the optionality of nominal address, an entirely optional gendering of the social relationship between speaker and addressee (Poynton 1990). This research suggests that endearments may carry over into non-intimate contexts residual meanings of gendered relationships, interpersonal closeness, and an adult–child talk pattern – a functional profile substantially different to stereotypical notions of positive regional, ethnic and class identification and rapport enhancement.

More recent corpus-driven research on endearment *love* in British English (Baumgarten 2021, 2023) suggests that *love* is undergoing a pragmatic shift towards indexing disaffiliative stances and becoming more generally available as a negative evaluative token for non-normative behaviour. This indicates that the indexicalities around *love* are changing and, as a consequence, that the endearment may be understood in different ways and used with different functions by different people. However, corpus and discourse analytical approaches to interactions alone cannot reveal the relational concerns and motivations language users may seek to act upon using *love*; therefore, in order to understand the value systems attached to linguistic choice in interactional practice, the insights derived from discourse data need to be complemented by language users’ metapragmatic comments and reflections on the linguistic form and its use.

The data reported on in this article were collected through a survey questionnaire on usage and user attitudes towards *love*. The analysis of the survey responses follows a form-based, meta-pragmalinguistic approach (Kádár and House 2020; Kádár and Haugh 2013): It investigates language users reflexive awareness of *love* to reveal how they conceive of the form–function relationships encapsulated in the term, including not only the interactional work that is supported by *love*, but also what, if any, social or cultural discourses are conventionally linked with *love* and are thought to be indexable in interaction. To operationalise the notion of sociocultural discourses being actualised in interactional practice, the analysis draws on Agha’s concept of ‘metapragmatic typification’ and the related notions of ‘cultural models of speech’ and ‘stereotypic social indexicals’ (Agha 2004, 2007), which link speech repertoires with enactable pragmatic effects that construct in situ culturally recognisable ‘images of the person speaking’, ‘the relationship between speaker and interlocutor’ and their conduct of social practices’ (Agha 2004: 23). On this conceptual basis, this article specifically addresses

- the current pragmatic scope of *love* as understood by English language users in the UK;
- the availability of *love* for linguistic and social/geographical stereotyping as well as speakers’ identity work in interaction;
- the degree to which *love* is claimed by users as part of a ‘northern’ speech repertoire.

In the following, Section 2 first presents an overview of the indexical meaning potential of address terms related to cultural discourses and associated identities as well as their functionalisation for interaction management by summarising work carried out on the group of English familiarisers; second, the interactional functions of *love* are summarised. Section 3 outlines the notions of enregisterment and cultural models of speech used in this study to describe user understandings of the cultural indexicalities of *love*. Section 4 presents the survey data under consideration and the analysis method, specifically the application of elements of Membership Categorisation Analysis (Stokoe 2012) to identify cultural models of speech in survey data. Section 5 presents the results of quantitative and qualitative analyses and summarises the components of the cultural model of speech associated with *love*. Section 6 is the conclusion.

2 | Dude, Mate, Man and Love

2.1 | Familiarisers as Indices of Cultural Identities and Interactional Positioning

The group of English familiarisers, which originate in male peer groups as in-group solidarity markers, has been shown to be open to become invested with indexical values that can be used to express affiliation with cultural, ethnic, local or national identity constructs and discourses. In some cases, such as *dude*, *mate* and *man*, the cultural visibility and recognition of the indexical value of the form as a marker of a specific cultural identity are reflected in and reified by cultural representations of the forms in the media and, detached from original communicative contexts, on cultural

artefacts (e.g. T-shirts or mugs), which reinforce its indexical values by linking it with stereotypes of user and usage, and make it available to broader publics beyond local networks of use (Luckmann de Lopez 2013; Kiesling 2004).

At the same time, familiarisers have also been shown to evolve into pragmatic markers, progressively losing their deictic and addressing functions, while acquiring affective-emphatic or discourse-organising meanings (Heyd 2014; Kleinknecht and Souza 2017; Martínez 2018). For instance, when used with an affective-emphatic function (*it's been difficult mate*), the deictic meaning of the familiariser is assumed to be weakened, and its referential meaning is assumed to be desemanticised. Without a specific interactional context, therefore, there is no single meaning that a pragmaticalised familiariser encodes. This enables interpretations of the familiariser and its indexical meaning potential in context as being related to discourse structure marking, topic management or various types of speaker positioning towards the topic or the addressee, while interpretations as to whether the addressee is also being addressed by an individual instance of the form in an utterance remain vague. The referential and deictic indeterminacy and vagueness of the form – between address term and pragmatic marker – and the grammatical optionality of both address and pragmatic marking in English open it up to functionalisations as flexible and continuously evolving social indices linked to equally dynamic and evolving cultural discourses, driven by the social needs of its users in interaction. *Dude*, *mate* and *man* exemplify the kinds of social and cultural meanings that may become attached to address terms.

Kiesling (2004) examines the American address term *dude*, outlining its development into a discourse marker indexing 'cool solidarity' (282) – a novel form of desirable masculinity for middle-class European American young men navigating complex cultural discourses of gender identity. *Dude* encompasses meanings of nonconformity, strict heterosexuality and masculine solidarity, enabling a subversive yet conformist gendered generational identity. On the one hand, *dude* signals nonconformity, subverting 1980s 'yuppie consumerism' through indexing a connection to 'surfer and druggie subcultures' (282), where relaxed attitudes towards authority are valued. On the other hand, it signals alignment with dominant discourses of American masculinity that present a narrow range of ratified relationships between men: masculine solidarity (implying closeness) and heterosexism (entailing non-intimacy). More recently, Needle and Tagliamonte (2025) find that geographical community membership significantly shapes familiariser usage, with *dude* indexing regional, cultural and generational identity in Ontario, Canada, especially among female speakers born in the 1970s and 1980s. They suggest that speakers from different communities might maintain 'oppositional [geographical] identities' indexed by different familiarisers, with *dude* associated with being "urban" or "southern" (i.e., from Toronto).

Mate in Australian English is pervasively associated with imaginations of national identity, character and values (Wierzbicka 1997; Rendle-Short 2009, 2010). The concepts of *mate* and 'mateship' encapsulate attitudes of equality, solidarity, camaraderie and non-intimate friendship, emphasising shared circumstances – particularly physical hardship – as core societal ideals. Alimoradian (2014) studied the use of *mate* by Australians from non-English-speaking backgrounds, finding a correlation between usage frequency and ethnic heritage orientation, which suggests that using the term is tied to Australian rather than heritage affiliation, and a desire to integrate into mainstream culture. For these speakers, *mate* may function as a linguistic and cultural assimilation tool; participants noted that it 'makes me feel more Australian', 'feels like belonging to [the] Australian cultural majority' or 'gives a sense of an Australian identity despite skin colour' (599). Non-Anglo Australians reported using *mate* specifically to be seen as Australian.

Luckmann de Lopez (2013) finds a strong link between the familiariser *man* and a Geordie working-class identity in Tyneside English (UK), developing from a community in which economic hardships like factory, shipyard and mine closures fostered a strong sense of working-class solidarity. Clause- or utterance-final use of *man* with local prosody signals claims to group membership and solidarity, and indexes mock impoliteness and banter stances that foster social intimacy, especially among males projecting identifications as working-class men.

Speakers incorporate the macro functions of indexing cultural identities into micro-interactional practice. The broad cultural meanings associated with a familiariser are a resource that can be actualised in interaction in various ways to achieve context-dependent micro-interactional effects in the moment-by-moment unfolding of the interaction. For example, *dude* and *mate* have been shown to be used in the context of challenging power relationships and perceived hierarchy (Kiesling 2004; Rendle-Short 2010), where users appear to strategically enlist associated cultural meanings of solidarity, equality and rejecting authority. Hence, in such contexts, *dude* and *mate* may be heard as positive, mitigating confrontation or negative, emphasising hostility, antagonism, sarcasm or irony. The cultural indexicalities of the term make it possible for the speaker to simultaneously project and disclaim a confrontational stance, while its deictic and referential vagueness allows claiming or disclaiming an overt summoning and identifying of the interlocutor.

Lastly, pragmaticalisation can result in shifts in gender associations and the indexing of gendered identities. The use of *dude* and *mate* in North American and Australian contexts has expanded beyond male-to-male peer groups to function increasingly in female or mixed-gender dyads and groups. For women, *dude* appears to index a solitary stance unconnected to masculinity but retains the meaning of non-intimacy (Kiesling 2004). Needle and Tagliamonte (2025)

suggest Toronto women may use *dude* to avoid *man*, which retains strong correlations with male-to-male usage and semantic connections with masculinity. Similarly, Rendle-Short (2009) found that young Australian women view *mate* as a 'friendly and fun' (265) term to show social intimacy.

2.2 | Love

The indexical meaning potential and pragmaticalisation of English endearments (such as *darling*, *love* and *sweetheart*) have been less extensively documented. Although typically reserved for intimate or private contexts, endearments have proliferated to be used to and by female strangers in public and institutional contexts and have, in this public domain, become associated with class-related linguistic stereotypes: They are associated with service encounters and service provider talk as well as caregiver talk in eldercare (Bridgstock et al. 2025). Endearment *love* is also popularly associated with a particular British regional identity (northern England) and non-academic communities in that region (Culpeper and Gillings 2018). It is generally described as a rapport enhancement expression embedded in conversational routines (*thanks love*; *hello love*; *sorry love*) indexing a northern local (such as 'Yorkshire') or pan-northern identity characterised by rusticity, a working-class ethos (Beal 2004; Wales 2006), and as being emblematic of a 'northern' type of friendliness that includes being friendly to strangers (Culpeper and Gillings 2018). Although gendered, in some local northern contexts, it can be used in solidary male-male constellations (Beal 2004; Dunkling 1990), suggesting a regional pragmaticalised degendered variant. However, to date there has been very little empirical research on contemporary usage and none on user understandings to underpin these descriptions.

Recent corpus-based research has shown that the functions of *love* in everyday interaction are complex and evolving across generations of speakers, with users strategically leveraging indexicalities to enact power in the context of interaction management, performing social evaluation and the construction of moral hierarchies. Its role in contemporary British English can be understood as a Ritual Frame Indicating Expression (Kádár and House 2020), which signals a highly conventionalised ('ritual') communicative frame in which participants are slotted into conventionalised roles with circumscribed rights, obligations and juxtaposed in a set of sanctioned role relationships. Ritual uses of *love* project an affect-infused, close relationship supporting the speaker's claim to rights, social authority and compliance expectation to manage the unfolding interaction (Baumgarten 2021).

The meaning dimensions of affect, authority and compliance expectation have also become specialised for the performance of third-party evaluation within constructed dialogue and storytelling, exploiting voicing effects (Tannen 1986, 2010; Agha 2007) through which contrasting voices or stances are foregrounded in the interaction. In these contexts, *love* functions as a stereotypic social indexical (Agha 2004) used to assess the behaviour or personality of absent others through evoking cultural stereotypes of personhood: for instance, when a speaker voices a third party as saying 'Hello my love, how you doing?' to characterise them as 'always happy' or when a speaker recounting an interaction with a 'sassy' girl reports her own internal thought as: 'I was like woah woah woah love you'll get nowhere with that attitude.' These uses of *love* indicate that its functional profile in British English goes significantly beyond being a maker of rapport and regional identity. The availability of *love* to be self-consciously performed as part of stereotyping of others indicates that *love* is enregistered in conversational English as a linguistic feature that indexes specific culturally recognisable categories of people, behaviours and relationships.

3 | Cultural Models of Speech

The present analysis employed Agha's (2004) concept of cultural models of speech as a way of understanding user perceptions of the social and cultural meanings associated with *love*. Cultural models of speech are the product of processes of enregisterment which entail the development of reflexive awareness of language features and their associations with social categories and related patterns of social evaluation in a community.

Enregisterment is the process through which linguistic features become recognised as part of a distinct, socially meaningful speech repertoire indexical of specific cultural values. This process requires higher-order indexicality. The concept of orders of indexicality (Silverstein 2003) describes how the relationship between linguistic features and social meaning evolves from unnoticed correlations with sociodemographic categories to overt social stereotypes. First-order indexicality involves an unnoticed correlation between a linguistic feature and a sociodemographic speaker category. Second-order indexicality occurs when these correlations are noticed and begin – consciously or not – to perform social work by becoming interpretable in relation to sociodemographic categories. Linguistic features thus become resources for hearing others' geographical origin, class, gender or level of education, and can also be strategically

deployed or avoided to project particular identities or social relationships. Third-order indexicality represents the stage at which these links have become explicitly codified into linguistic stereotypes associated with, for example, social class, place, authenticity or folklorism, enabling overtly self-conscious identity performance and often featuring in media representations of a place and its local register (e.g. Johnstone et al. 2006; Luckmann de Lopez 2013; Snell 2017; Beal 2004).

Enregisterment operates through metapragmatic typification: the process by which language users make evaluative judgements about salient linguistic features, for example by labelling speech as 'informal' or 'working class'. These evaluations link linguistic forms to cultural models of speech: culture-internal categorisations of the actors, activities and social relations associated with a type of language use. Once associated with a cultural model of speech, linguistic features become usable as stereotypic indexicals in interaction. Language users draw on these stereotypic indexicals to render personae (speaker, addressee or third parties), relationships and behaviours culturally recognisable in discourse, and to interpret others' contributions in relation to the associated cultural model of speech.

Within an overarching cultural model of speech shared by a population, the concept of a stereotypic indexical, thus, refers to a linguistic form or repertoire of forms that is regularly associated with a particular social type and an associated enregistered social voice for this social type. The following analysis will show the social types, relationships and conduct of social practices that are regularly associated with endearment *love* as well as the value systems which shape its use, interpretation and perception. This allows us to reconstruct user understandings of the pragmatic scope of *love* as a discursive resource in social action.

To operationalise the notion of cultural models of speech for empirical analysis, this study draws on analytical concepts developed within Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) (Hester and Eglin 1997; Stokoe 2012). MCA examines how members of society deploy their everyday working knowledge of society in the course of performing social actions in interaction. Similar to the way in which cultural models of speech capture socially shared and socio-historically specific knowledge of social types, MCA examines linguistic membership categorisation practices as the ways people use orientations to social categories, their associated activities and moral valuations to construct and display their social understanding of the unfolding interaction. Categorisation processes, that is, the use of social classifications by speakers, render the world objectively available and culturally familiar (Heritage 1984, cited in Stokoe 2012: 299), because individuals draw upon and reproduce cultural understandings through their categorisations. Shared category knowledge – at both the cultural macro level, where categories reflect sociopolitical orders, ideologies and power relations, and the interactional micro level, where they are deployed in situ and flexibly imbued with context-based meaning while mobilising macro-cultural inferences – is deemed foundational for interaction to proceed smoothly. Importantly, categories are not rigid, predefined points of reference; rather, acts of categorisation are actively and flexibly deployed to trigger inferential work in the accomplishment of practical interactional tasks (Benwell and Stokoe 2006).

MCA rests on three core concepts (Stokoe 2012):

1. Membership Categories are the fundamental social classifications or social types (for instance, 'customer' and 'parent') used to describe and label individuals. These categories serve as reservoirs of community-specific common-sense knowledge regarding social roles, expected characteristics and conduct.
2. Membership Categorisation Devices structure categories into larger collective categories that organise social knowledge (for instance, 'family').
3. Category-Bound Activities and Predicates are the specific actions, characteristics, attributes, beliefs, knowledge, entitlements or obligations conventionally associated with a particular membership category (for instance, 'a friendly Sheffielder').

Central to MCA is the recognition that categorisation is intrinsically linked to the moral order. The moral order can be defined as taken-for-granted conventions and expectations of behaviour assumed to be shared by communicative partners and, more broadly, within a sociocultural group, where they are understood as group values. It provides the frame of reference for evaluating behaviour as 'good'/'bad', 'appropriate'/'inappropriate' and 'permissible'/'prohibited' (Kádár and Haugh 2013; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2016). Membership categories are imbued with rights and obligations derived from the moral order, creating normative expectations about behaviour. They are deployed in interaction to make moral judgements and to appeal to these expectations as speakers pursue identity and positioning work (Edwards 2008). Table 1 maps MCA analytical concepts onto the components of cultural models of speech.

MCA is an inductive approach. Categories and their significance emerge solely from the data.

TABLE 1 | Cultural models of speech mapped to MCA.

Cultural model of speech	Membership categorisation analysis	Example from the data
Personhood: Image of the person speaking	Membership categories	'old school males'
Relationship of speaker to interlocutor	Paired categories Hierarchically positioned categories Collective categories	'romantic partner' 'doctor-patient' 'men'
Activity/conduct of social practices	Category-based activities Category-tied predicates	'show care' 'has an average education'
Metapragmatic evaluation	Moral order; moral judgements	'it's harmless'

4 | Data

The data were collected by means of an online survey questionnaire (Baumgarten 2026). It is a self-administered questionnaire based on similar instruments used by Kiesling (2004), Alimoradian (2014), Rendle-Short (2009) and Cooper (2013), designed to tap into respondents' metapragmatic understanding and awareness of the endearment *love* as a local dialect feature. The questions targeted

- respondents' own usage of *love* in various interpersonal constellations stratified by social distance and power,
- their evaluative attitudes towards *love* as both users and recipients of the endearment and
- social classifications of uses and users of *love*.

The questionnaire included closed questions (multiple-choice and scales) to collect quantifiable assessments of *love* and open-ended questions eliciting reflective discourse on *love* to gather qualitative data in the respondents' own words. All questions were optional; they reflect what respondents decided to share about personal experiences and subjective opinions underlying their own use of endearment *love*, their attitudes towards *love* and people who use it. The questionnaire also collected sociodemographic information (including age, gender identification, ethnic group membership and place of residence), as well as questions on regional affiliation, speech style and ethnic orientation. The latter are not included in the present analysis.

The questionnaire taps into the relationship between language, place, identity and linguistic prestige which, in the present case, is linked with public and societal discourses on a 'North-South' divide in the UK. These discourses encompass factual socio-economic regional inequalities, lingering negative bias against 'northern English' (Wales 2000, 2009 cited in Culpeper and Gillings 2018), and valorisations of 'northern English' as a marker of 'northern identities' characterised by stereotypical friendliness, rusticity and old-fashionedness. The questionnaire design was intended to resonate with these discourses; however, the questions do not specifically mention or engage respondents in these topics.

The questionnaire was published through social media in various communities and networks with a topical connection with Sheffield, including the request to share it in personal networks. The goal was to capture a diverse range of ages and social backgrounds, but no formal quotas for sociodemographic categories were applied. It is acknowledged that online recruitment and participation will have created barriers to participation, possibly in particular regarding older demographics. The data collected, thus, are a product of non-random convenience and snowball sampling and as such are not representative of the larger population. They do, nonetheless, represent localised and locally grounded understandings of *love* by people with some biographical or personal connection with the local area. All returned questionnaires were manually checked for bot activity, and suspicious submissions were discarded. The final data set comprises 472 valid responses, providing insight into the interactional, relational, motivational bases and other concerns that underlie individuals' perceptions, actions and assessments.

5 | Analysis

Descriptive statistics and χ^2 tests (test of independence) were used with quantifiable responses to describe relationships within the sample. The χ^2 results are limited to the sample and do not allow broader generalisations about the larger population because of the non-random sampling method used. MCA was used to analyse the qualitative responses generated by open-ended questions.

TABLE 2 | Educational background.

GCSE or similar	21
A-level or similar	76
Undergraduate degree	183
Postgraduate degree	181
Prefer not to say	0
Total	461

The application of MCA involved a systematic, iterative process starting from the assumption that questionnaire responses are – despite their elicited nature – instances of situated language use and common-sense reasoning. As an inductive approach, MCA facilitates pragmatic analyses grounded in the perspectives of language users rather than those of the analyst, which also avoids categorisation of data into prefabricated categories and the associated risk of manufacturing sharedness or difference of pragmatic understanding. Repeated patterns of language use to achieve categorisation across respondents are assumed to reflect shared pragmatic knowledge; shared patterns of categorisation reveal shared cultural understandings and social norms.

For the present analysis, the responses to open-ended questions are treated as written accounts in which respondents describe their experiences, opinions and observations, applying categorisations and performing attitudinal positioning reflective of their understanding of society and the boundaries they accordingly place on themselves and others regarding the use of *love*. In these accounts, respondents implicitly or explicitly categorise themselves and others, drawing upon assumed shared common-sense knowledge of social types, classifications and associated attributes to render their descriptions intelligible. The accounts contain what respondents consider normal, appropriate or morally culpable in their social world; they yield an understanding of the underlying social logic and normative frameworks that shape interaction and perception within a community.

Open-ended textual responses were extracted onto a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis software (VERBI Software 2024) and subjected to an initial phase of repeated reading, complemented by note-taking, memo writing and initial open and demographic coding, to gain familiarity with the content, notice recurring patterns and arrive at a general understanding of the overall thematic tenor of the data (Saldaña 2021). Then, responses were analysed line-by-line to identify both explicitly stated and implicitly invoked social categories, activities, attributes and moral evaluations associated with *love*. Throughout the analysis, rigorous reflexivity was maintained to avoid the imposition of predetermined concepts and ensure that the interpretations were grounded exclusively in the categories and categorisation practices made relevant by the respondents themselves. Combined with the quantitative picture reflected in the descriptive statistical analysis, the analysis of categorisation was used to deduce the cultural models of speech (speaker, relationship and conduct types) associated with *love*. The analysis is thus not primarily interested in categories themselves. The categories and categorisation processes made relevant by respondents were used to derive empirically grounded user understandings of the pragmatic meaning of *love*.

6 | Results

6.1 | General Profile of the Respondents

The questionnaire captured a wide range of ages (min 18, max 82, average 37, STDV 12.5) and educational backgrounds (Table 2). Out of the 472 respondents, 296 gave their gender identification as female, 162 as male, and 8 as non-binary.

99% of respondents chose to self-categorise in terms of ethnic group membership (Table 3). Approximately 80% identify as ‘White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British’. Following the ethnic group categorisation model adopted by the UK government at the time of data collection, ‘White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British’ is considered the ethnic majority, while all other ethnic group categories are considered ethnic minorities.

The ratio between majority and minority ethnic groups is very similar to the ethnic profile of the city of Sheffield in the latest UK census (Office for National Statistics 2022). However, while the data come close to reflecting the ethnic diversity of the area, the focus of the analysis lies on the distinction between established residents in the area (pre-tertiary education and current residence in the area or previous long-term residence, including at least primary education) and relative newcomers in order to capture differences in understanding, uses and perceptions of *love* in relation to geographical

TABLE 3 | Ethnic self-categorisation.

Majority		Minority	
White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	379	Bangladeshi	1
		Black British	2
		Chinese	5
		Gypsy or Irish Traveller	1
		Indian	3
		Irish	9
		White and Asian	7
		White and Black African	1
		White and Black British	22
		White and Black Caribbean	3
		Any other White background	24
		Any other Asian background	3
		Any other Black background	1
		Any other ethnic group	4
		Any other mixed or multiple ethnic background	4

TABLE 4 | Established and Newcomer resident groups and ethnic minority/majority status.

	Minority (90)	Majority (379)
Established	20	157
Newcomer	57	205

TABLE 5 | Do you ever call someone *love*? (Significant at $p < .10$; $\chi^2 (1, N = 440) = 3.10, p = .07$).

	Yes	No
Established	71.9% (128)	28.1% (50)
Newcomer	63.7% (167)	36.3% (95)

mobility, space and place – the spatial and social contexts of where respondents live or with which they have had long-term biographical links. The Sheffield postcode area was used as the basis of grouping responses into *Established* and *Newcomer* residents or *Outsiders*. In the following, the focus will be on the Established and Newcomer responses (Table 4).

7 | Self-Reported Usage

Newcomers use *love* significantly less than Established respondents (Table 5), with habituality assessments (from ‘hardly ever’ to ‘many times a day’) showing that high-frequency use is more typical of Established respondents (Table 6). Broken down by gender (Table 7), Established males are the most typical users, followed by Newcomer and Established females. The differences between Established and Newcomer males ($p < .01$) and Newcomer females and Newcomer males ($p < .05$) are statistically significant,¹ suggesting more constraints on use within the Newcomer male group.

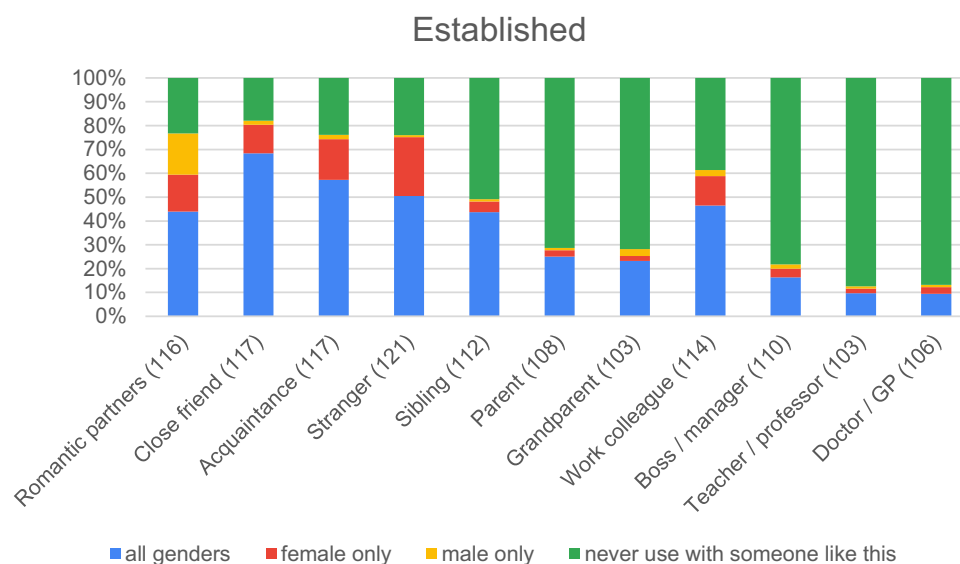
To capture usage conventions in relation to social distance, social status, and public contexts, respondents were asked to indicate their use of *love* in a set of adult–adult interpersonal constellations differentiated by levels of acquaintance, institutional power relationships, and familial generational relationships (Figure 1a, b). While both groups appear

TABLE 6 | How often do you use *love* in this way? (Significant at $p < .01$; $\chi^2 (3, N = 300) = 13.91, p = .003$).

	Hardly ever	About once a week	About once a day	Many times a day
Established	15% (19)	20% (26)	28% (35)	37% (47)
Newcomer	27% (46)	30% (52)	21% (36)	23% (39)

TABLE 7 | Do you ever call someone *love*? by Established/Newcomer and gender identification.

	Yes	No
Established, female	67.3% (70)	32.7% (34)
Established, male	77.8% (56)	22.2% (16)
Established, non-binary	100.0% (1)	0.0%
Newcomer, female	69.0% (118)	31.0% (53)
Newcomer, male	54.3% (44)	45.7% (37)
Newcomer, non-binary	42.9% (3)	57.1% (4)

**FIGURE 1a** | Established responses to: What kind of person are you likely to call *love*? (Select all that apply and indicate their gender). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

constrained by familial seniority and institutional hierarchies, Newcomers seem more constrained by social distance (acquaintances and public settings), status (institutional power) and intragenerational relationships (siblings). By contrast, for Established respondents, *love* appears to be licensed to a greater extent in these constellations. The difference in reported use is significant at $p < .01$ for 'stranger', 'acquaintance', 'work colleague', 'boss/manager' and 'doctor/GP', and at $p < .05$ for 'teacher/professor' and 'sibling'.² Assuming similar understandings of these interactional contexts, Established respondents clearly judge *love* as more appropriate and useful for navigating these relationships and positioning themselves within the encounter.

Figure 2 shows the experience of respondents as recipients of *love*. Use across social distance – by 'strangers' and 'acquaintances' – is most frequent and outweighs use in intimate, familial and familiar contexts. This pattern is identical for Newcomer and Established respondents; in both groups, *love* is predominantly associated with public settings and may, for that reason, be perceived as a feature of the language of public space.

Most Established and Newcomer respondents claim awareness of *love* as a regional feature (Figure 3). However, asked to attribute it to 'British English', 'Northern England', 'Yorkshire' or 'Sheffield', Established respondents offered more

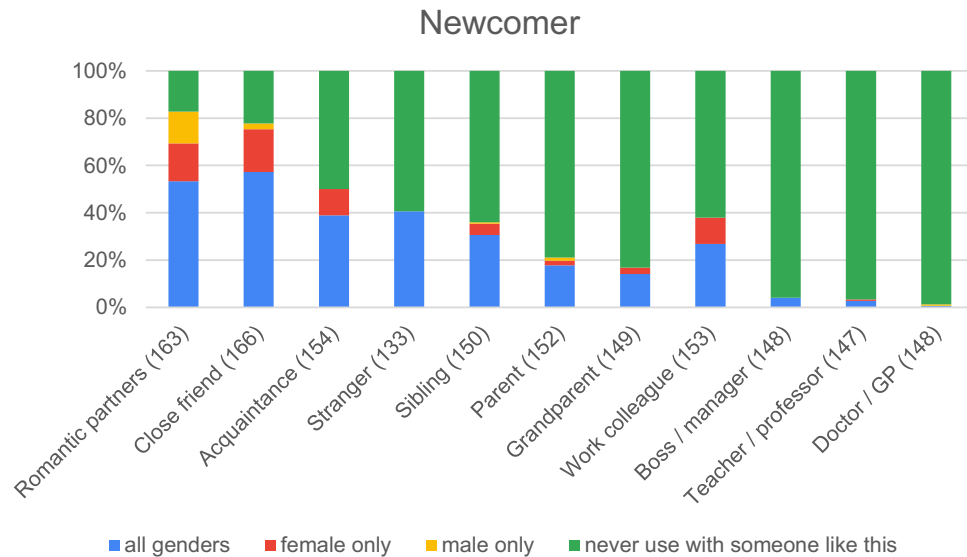


FIGURE 1b | Newcomer responses to: What kind of person are you likely to call *love*? (Select all that apply and indicate their gender). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/weng.70042)]

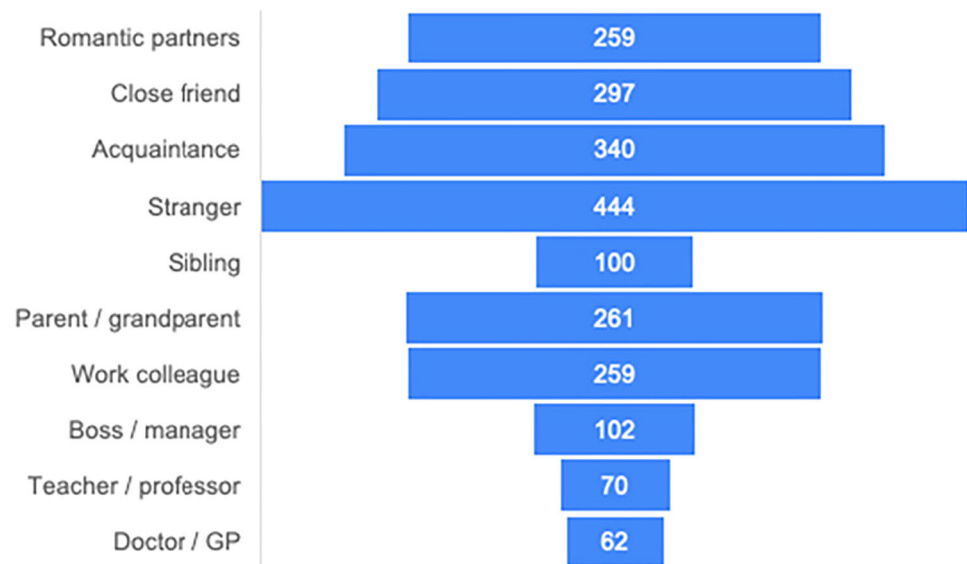


FIGURE 2 | Established and Newcomer responses to: Have you ever been called *love*? (Select all that apply). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/weng.70042)]

localised (Yorkshire, Sheffield) associations, whereas Newcomers' spatial impressions were significantly broader and less focused on their current place of residence (Table 8).

Lastly, whereas Established respondents report *love* as embedded in family and friendship networks, Newcomers report few or no such associations. Both groups, however, predominantly categorise love as a modern feature of the regional dialect and reject the notion that it is outdated or stigmatised (Figures 4a and 4b).

The quantitative results indicate that for this group of Sheffield residents, *love* is associated with use in public and across social and distance and social status. Newcomers appear to perceive more constraints on use and also have significantly broader geographical associations reaching beyond 'the North'. Both groups, however, understand *love* predominantly as a contemporary, region-specific language feature. This raises the question if Newcomers do know *love* from other places and consider it a modern feature of the regional dialect, what might place constraints on their use of the term in Sheffield? Respondents' understanding of the indexicalities of *love* underlying their reported usage and spatial associations is discussed below. Specific focus will be on the moral valuations attached to *love*: who uses it, who can use it legitimately,

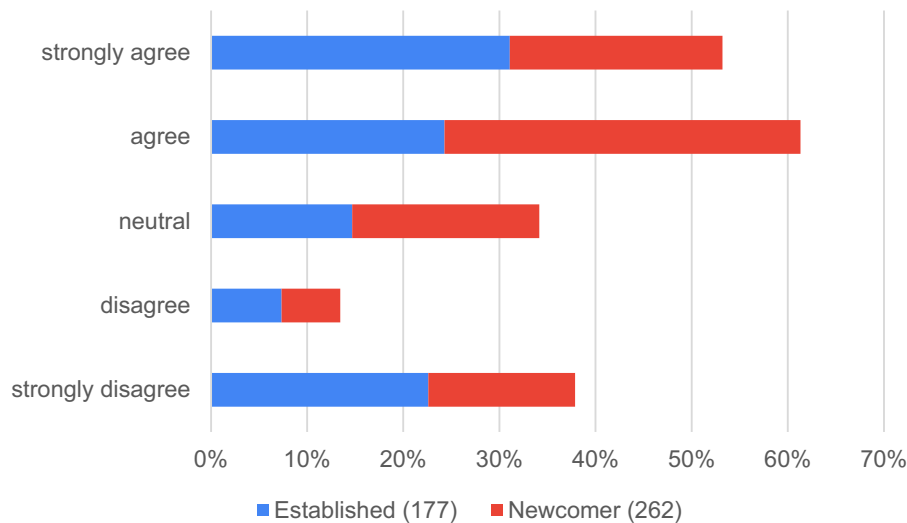


FIGURE 3 | Does hearing or calling someone *love* make you feel conscious of (being in) the North/Sheffield? [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

TABLE 8 | Would you say calling someone *love* is typical of ...? (You can select more than one). χ^2 (3, N = 921) = 16.54, p = .0009. Significant at p < .01.

	British English	Northern England	Yorkshire	Sheffield
Established	3.9% (15)	24.2% (92)	37.4% (142)	33.7% (128)
Newcomer	8.3% (45)	31.8% (172)	32.0% (173)	27.2% (147)

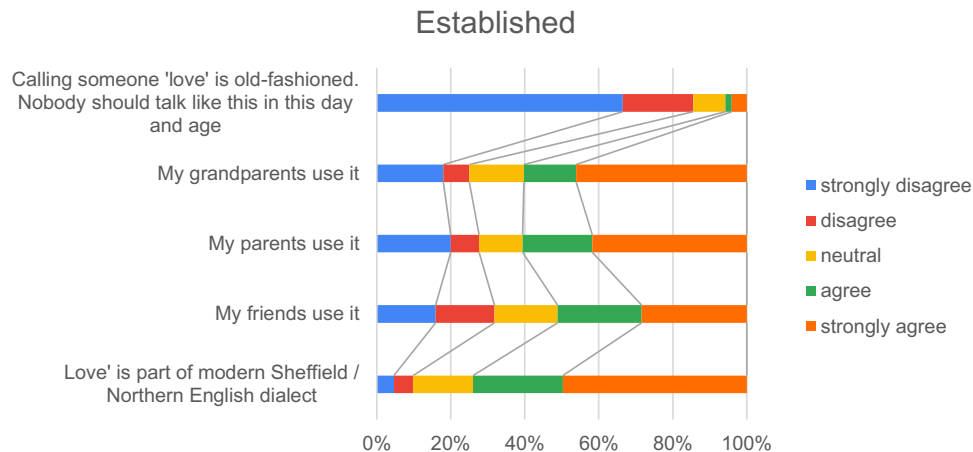


FIGURE 4a | Established responses to: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

with whom and in the context of what social practices. This will reveal the underlying cultural models of speech determining the use and interpretation of *love*.

7.1 | Metapragmatic Typification

The open survey questions elicited explicit metapragmatic discourse about the social meaning of *love*. The analysis is based on respondents' metapragmatic assessments in relation to the questions 'Why do you call someone *love*?' (309 responses), 'What do you think it says about you if you call someone *love*?' (302 responses), 'What kind of person uses *love* frequently?'

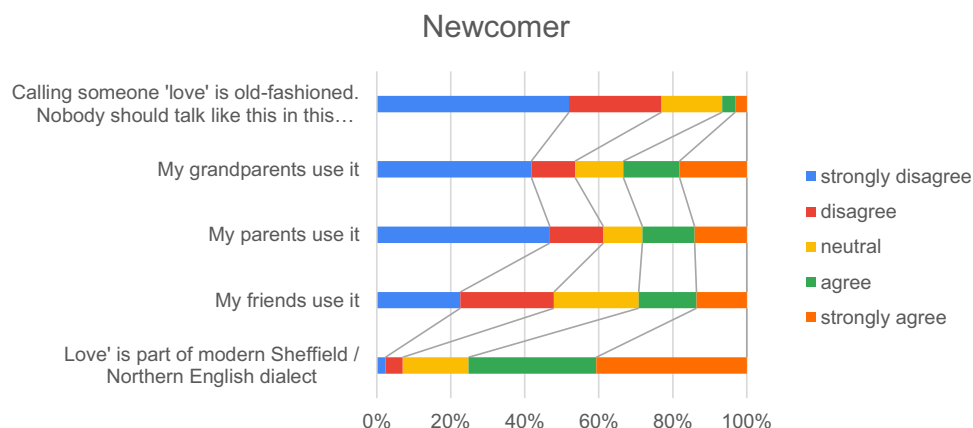


FIGURE 4b | Newcomer responses to: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

(455 responses) and ‘Do you like being called *love*?’ (462 responses). These questions elicited three complementary user perspectives as active user, addressee and emic observer of local social and discursive practices. Respondents not only give accounts of their personal practice but also draw on their understanding of the public imagination of the relationship between language, people (identities), place and time. No attempt was made to systematically distinguish between actual and imagined practice, except for when respondents made that distinction themselves. In order to be able to describe user understandings of the conventionalised linguacultural patterns that license the use of *love* in social interaction, the analysis looked for consistent patterns in relation to social classification and moral evaluation.³ They are presented through the lens of metapragmatic typification of (1) personhood (the image of the person speaking), (2) the relationship of speaker to interlocutors, (3) conduct of social practices (interactional stances), and (4) moral evaluation (valorisations).

7.2 | Personhood: The Image of the Person Speaking

The majority association about the person of the speaker is with regional speakers as defined by sociodemographic characteristics and speaker personality traits. In contrast with the self-reported experience (Figures 1 and 2), parents and romantic partners are less frequently mentioned in the accounts, indicating that metapragmatic typifications of *love* are not in the first instance associated with the language of factually existing intimate relationships. Sociodemographic associations relate to regional or geographical provenance (‘Yorkshire’ and ‘Northerners’)⁴ and local rootedness of the speaker, which may be indexed by a discernible regional accent or dialect, characterised as ‘broad’ (‘broad Sheffield accent/dialect’), and which is understood as the result of familial upbringing and community exposure (‘Sheffield upbringing’, ‘heard it so much growing up’). One respondent summarises the regional characteristic as being ‘more embedded in an area or family that has retained a larger connection to the regional dialect’. Others refer to this as ‘locally born and bred’, ‘proper Yorkshire person’, ‘my more Yorkshire friends and colleagues’ and ‘friendly Sheffield folk’, underscoring the idea that it is a combination of time spent and native rootedness in the region which shapes a person’s vocabulary and renders using *love* ‘instinctive’ and ‘second nature’, making speakers ‘natural’ users. The geographical associations range from very specific micro-local (‘Steelworks’, ‘the other side of Sheffield’) to more macro regional references (‘the north (of England)’, ‘Yorkshire’, as compared with ‘down south’).

This regional classification is often combined with references to speakers’ age, gender, class, education and occupation or role. The most frequent association is ‘older’, making *love* feature of ‘mature’, ‘old-fashioned’, ‘traditional’, ‘old-school’ talk associated with the ‘previous generation’. However, ‘older’ indexes an age differential and usage pattern older-to-younger rather than an age bracket: The youngest ‘old’ mentioned is ‘over 30’. Although only few respondents think that *love* is not a modern dialect feature (Figure 4), it is not considered a ‘young’ feature: The consistent link with older speakers and older generations in the accounts supports the idea of *love* being naturally used by a person stitched into a traditional, local-cultural fabric and shaped by familial intergenerational addressing and interaction patterns that are replicated throughout the community. References to class, occupation and education are used to further specify the idea of this community socio-demographically; however, these are categorisations that are just below the reporting threshold of one quarter of responses. This suggests that there is an undercurrent of these meanings across some accounts, but they are not at the forefront of respondents’ understanding of the term.⁵ The accounts refer to ‘working class’ explicitly or suggest it in mentions of ‘service industry’, ‘deal with the public’ and may have a ‘communicative need for a word to refer to a stranger’, as well

as through class associations implied in evaluations of education level, behavioural refinement and prestige ('average education', 'less posh', 'common people', 'common-ish', 'broad', 'not from an upper class background').

Associations with personality traits relate to mentions of 'friendly' and 'kind' persons, with positive term associations related to the speaker's character disposition in terms of their affective state ('happy') interpersonal orientation ('affectionate', 'warm', 'caring', 'non-threatening'), and interactional stance ('open', 'outgoing', 'easy going', 'people person', 'chatty', 'cheery', 'lively'). The typical speaker, thus, is perceived as displaying feelings of positive affect grounded in a positive character disposition that signals security, trustworthiness, emotional attunement and sensitivity for others' feelings. A further set of categorisations describes speakers as having an unpretentious personality ('friendly and down to earth in a Northern way', 'no airs or graces', 'casual'). The typical speaker, thus, also exhibits a non-pretentious self-presentation and a low-formality interpersonal style characterised by the absence of overt status marking. When users claim a speaker identity for themselves, they tend to make the same affective, interactional, character and, if they are Established users, localised claims ('I'm Yorkshire, I'm friendly, I'll help you. Even if you're a stranger', 'That I am being warm and welcoming and I am a Sheffield lass').

A very small minority of accounts (19) describe transgressive men as typical users of *love*. They are characterised as violating norms of respect, equality, consent or care, thereby positioning the addressee of *love* as diminished, unsafe or insufficiently regarded in the interaction ('misogynist', 'patronising', 'demeaning', 'predatory', 'creepy', 'insensitive'). However, many more accounts (192) acknowledge that *love* can be meant and heard as patronising or condescending depending on the context. Typically, this is linked with male speakers and their perceived attitudes and intentions vis-à-vis the female addressee and a feeling of being singled out on the part of recipient ('I don't mind being called love by other women but can feel patronising coming from men towards women sometimes'; '"Can I get you anything else love" in a cafe (said to every customer) is very different from some bloke who only says it to people who identify as female'; 'if you can tell it's not being used politely or it's being used by a man who is clearly using it to be overly friendly then I don't like it').

7.3 | Relationship of Speaker to Interlocutors

In the respondents' accounts, *love* supports three relational models distinguished by configurations of social distance: (1) a close or intimate relationship between interlocutors, (2) no relationship, defined by the absence of familiarity, and (3) a socially distant – often institutionally framed – non-intimate relationship. These three models correspond to the use of the term in very private, familial and close personal network contexts, in very mundane, consensual, brief and transactional activities between strangers in the public realm, and in socially consequential interactions shaped by institutional norms which define the recipients' social standing in the encounter so that respect for authority and autonomy related to a professional role, age/seniority or gender are at stake. The use of *love* is understood to support a 'no relationship' positioning when it is used with ritual illocution or procedurally polite meaning (Edmondson and House 1981; Watts 2003) in routine formulae and conversational routines ('thanks love', 'bye love') in which the term blends into the function of the phrase (thanking and leave taking) and is assumed to have no separate interpretability. The use of *love* also supports 'intimate and close relationship' positioning, expressing genuine affection or concern ('are you ok love, you seem a bit down today'), in which *love* is perceived as functioning separately to foreground the speaker's investment in relational concerns ('personally i use it to show romantic affection but I think if I was older it would be acceptable to use it as a term of general affection').

The existence of these two contrasting modes of relational work supported by *love* opens up the possibility for *love* to be heard as indexing a relationship framing in interaction that is not mutually recognised, for example, when recipients are able to hear transactional-ritual meanings in a professional relationship or affective meanings outside intimate and close relationships ('I think it's nice and friendly – but just by strangers e.g. shop assistants – don't think it would be appropriate for a work colleague/boss to use it as it doesn't seem professional'; 'Can sometimes feel intrusive if overused or in a situation where intimacy isn't appropriate'). Often accounts refer to different relational models, indicating the existence of constraints and conditions of licensed use in social practice ('Yes by female friends or female colleagues, because it is a term of endearment. I don't like being called *love* by strangers, from men I feel it is sexist and from women I feel it is patronising/passive aggressive').

7.4 | Conduct of Social Practice

Love is understood as signalling an emotional and moral connection between the interlocutors which forms the interpersonal basis of the interaction. A majority and a minority model can be distinguished. The majority of accounts claim that *love* supports displays of positive affective and relational attitudes of different intensities and qualities, ranging

from strong affect and relational bond ('show that I love them'), to moderate affect ('I like them'), to relational commitment ('we have a close relationship'), a willingness to engage ('I have time for them'), a recognition of the others' social and moral value ('shows a trust and bond between us'), moral behaviour ('trustworthy', 'sincere', 'empathic', 'compassionate' and 'non-threatening') and relational equality through overcoming social distance ('a staff cleaner in the hallway, calling them love makes it less formal and to show that I don't feel that I am better than them'). The main lexical association with this model of behaviour is 'being friendly'. In the accounts 'friendly' collocates with other positive, morally virtuous sentiment and conduct terms ('goodwill', 'kind', 'caring', 'warmth', 'sweet', 'nice', 'openness', 'approachability') as well as with 'polite' to suggest a particular kind of friendliness that is soft, warm, safe and informal but that is at the same time seen as unequivocally within the limits of a normative understanding of context-appropriate conventionally polite behaviour ('I'm being friendly and polite'; 'If I don't know their name, or other situations where saying their name would feel too formal'; 'a polite and friendly way to address someone'; 'it's friendly and softens language that may otherwise seem curt'). A very small minority model of conduct of social practice (15 mentions) draws on *love* to display performative stances in which voicings of *love* are used either to project humour and irony by making use of linguistic stereotypes ('I do not use love on its own except as a parody towards local Yorkshire individuals'; 'Sometimes as part of a silly voice, talking broader with family') or to display disaffiliative stances and social evaluation ('I would not address them with love but might refer to them as love if I'm talking semi negatively about them'; 'I also sometimes use it sarcastically, for example if someone was angry I would say "Calm down love."').

7.5 | Moral Evaluation and Valorisation

The use of *love* is justified as being part of the place and the way locals speak. Associated with this are normative assumptions about usage and meaning – what it is used for, how it is meant and how it should be heard by the recipient – as specifically tied to place. *Love* is valorised as deeply embedded in a northern culture which is displayed in 'regional' (Sheffield, Yorkshire, Northern) dialect to express a friendliness that fosters connection across social distance and formality. This is seen as an interactional value ('a gesture of friendliness and familiarity'), but respondents also orient to this as a personal value or a cultural value or both ('I like to think it makes me sound friendly and approachable. I expect I come across as a Northern Idiot to some'; 'northern and friendly go hand in hand'). As shown above, for the majority of respondents, *love* transcends social distance and formality as contextual variables for meaning interpretation and assessments of appropriateness of use. Its meaning in interaction is, therefore, understood to be 'nearly always positive', morally virtuous and legitimate ('harmless', 'no threat', 'generally accepted', 'not used maliciously'). Being grounded in a local identity lends this broad use of *love* across contexts and the general friendliness attribution its additional meaning dimensions of authenticity and by extension sincerity ('There is no hidden agenda or meaning around it. It's dialect from your region.').

As an element of local dialect, it is understood as having long roots in the cultural past from which it surfaces in the present in authentic form exclusively in speakers who, through their indexical behaviour, can be read as having had a local upbringing, being socialised into the practice through community exposure and intergenerational familial use. This cultural use of *love* is, therefore, engrained behaviour to be expected to occur naturally in locals as automatic, habitual, subconscious use that cannot be controlled ('it just comes out', 'I would likely do it less if not actually local'). The tight link with place, family and community is further strengthened by affective and nostalgic associations of 'feeling homely', evoking 'memories of childhood', 'growing up' and 'being young', including notions of loss of an old form of speaking that may be 'dying out' as part of 'the slide into the boring, grey uniform culture that globalisation is taking us to'.

The negative counter-valorisation is a minority position. Here, *love* is understood as indexing the gender of the recipient and as the unlicensed removal of social distance and formality, assuming availability and approachability of the recipient, and enforcing informality, intimacy and a gendered connection – with ulterior motives ('intentions are not pure' and 'wanting something'). The negative evaluations include accounts by Newcomers who assess initial experiences of being called *love* as 'hated it', 'discomforting', 'offended', 'off-putting' or 'weird'. However, Newcomers tend to state that they learned to understand *love* in the 'local way' ('I found it very weird until I heard a bus driver call the man behind me Love as well and it didn't bother me after that!'; 'It's a little weird to me coming from English as being a language that I learned, but understand it's just an idiom and remain neutral about the term.').

Legitimate or licensed use is, therefore, use that can be heard as authentic use in 'the Northern way' ('Ok if by a Northerner who would be expected to use it a part of normal speech. No if by someone outside their group as it feels unnatural'). This culture-specific use of *love* entails that the recipient has grounds to assume that they are not singled out to receive *love*. This interpretation is evoked when the speaker's use of *love* is in a licensed social voice: judged as authentic, indigenous and rooted in a native local identity, when it is accompanied by a 'broad' local accent and other dialect features to signal a local linguistic identity, and underpinned by other behaviours reflecting the actual social distance and formality of the

encounter. It is in this indexical configuration that *love* becomes hearable as genuine and sincerely friendly because it is deemed habitual, part of the speaker's everyday language, conceivably used with everyone. Respondents claim that the northern cultural use cannot be accomplished with a non-local accent ('I wish I felt comfortable to use the word myself (as a friendly term to strangers), but because of my accent I fear it might sound like I was taking the piss!'; 'If a Southern person does it it sounds a bit patronising'). For some, using *love* is further constrained by features of the addressee, limiting use to recipients who can be classified as fellow northerners by their accent or are assessed as 'would be ok with it' ('I probably only say it to people who also have a Northern accent. I definitely don't say it all the time – there's probably an unconscious filter that tells me who is appropriate to say that to.').

Because of the tight associations with local culture, nativeness, and accent/dialect as preconditions for authentic – licensed – use, Newcomers who are unable to claim the original rights to use due to their lack of biographical and linguistic localness cannot ground their use of *love* in the notion of local authenticity: Instead, they frame their use of *love* in terms of sustained local experience and acquired eligibility ('it is something I've earned the right to do now I've lived in Sheffield for 20+ years'), as acts of integration and assimilation ('I'm friendly and willing to integrate into the local culture'), invisibilisation ('Maybe I'm trying to pass as friendly but also local (I'm not from Sheffield, or even the UK). Maybe working class too...?'), 'I also use this subconsciously to blend in as I am not originally from Sheffield.'), and place-making and belonging by 'those who adopt the city as their own'. These complex indexicalities around licensed voices and licensed use are encapsulated in the account below by an Established Sheffield resident from a minority ethnic group:

Having a Yorkshire accent is something I turn on when needed, in order to communicate that I belong here and grew up here. It is a tool I use to establish familiarity, and combat the perpetual foreigner stereotype. My dad was very confused when he came to Sheffield and women called him love, he found it overly familiar. I find it to be something that if I engage with, it increases my sense of belonging. Sometimes I feel I have to prove that I am British, it is a constant assumption that I am not – until I open my mouth and a regional accent comes out.

8 | Conclusion

In this study, the themes of 'being northern' and 'being friendly' emerge for the first time as empirically, as opposed to anecdotally, linked to *love*. Moreover, *love* emerges from the data as a communicative practice that is organised around a specific socially recognisable and morally valorised model of attitude and social relations in everyday interaction and the public realm. Behind the label 'northern friendliness' is, thus, a complex mechanism of relational positioning that deploys *love* as an overt display of positive affect to manage relationships, regional identity, and moral standing in interaction.

While users describe *love* as a pragmaticalised feature that enables speaker positioning and relational work beyond its original interpersonal pattern of intimate speaker–addressee constellations, its core pragmatic function of metaphorically decreasing the social distance between speaker and addressee continues to be based in the semantic core of *love* as lexicalisations of the speaker's affective stance in intimate relationships. This explains why its deployment and interpretation in interaction appear to be governed by different understandings of contextually licensed use, which differentiate between types of user practice: regarding frequency, pervasiveness and habituality of use; regarding valorisations as morally virtuous or performative and transgressive, and regarding perceived accessibility of *love* as a marker of friendliness because of its intersections with notions of local belonging and authenticity that are exclusive or difficult to attain for newcomers. As such, *love* is clearly ideologically loaded.

Underlying these user understandings is *love* as an indexical sign of a culturally salient, recognisable model of speech linked to a place, speaker type, and moral order. The model is characterised by informal, egalitarian, anti-hierarchical stances, displays of positive speaker attitudes and the prioritisation of the relationship between speaker and interlocutor. While all interaction is relational, the interactional practice associated with *love* appears as specifically organised around a model that links particular affective stances ('friendly') with normative expectations about social relations (transcending social distance and formality). This model is generally known, and it is valorised by the majority as natural and moral.

Several critical nuances emerged: *love* is pervasively construed as an inward-looking cultural marker indexing a small place-bound identity rooted in history and associated with a narrow set of not overtly prestigious sociodemographic features. The distinctive social and spatial placement and origin of the speaker as 'northern' suggests a potential function as a cultural boundary marker. This poses limitations on the availability of *love* as a local shorthand for friendliness for speakers who cannot be readily identified as 'northern' in this way and, therefore, might also not be able to use *love* with the meaning of being friendly. Despite its widespread valorisation throughout the data as a marker of friendliness, *love* reflects an inward-looking and somewhat insular cultural model of speech.

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that *love* maintains a distinct developmental trajectory compared to familiarisers such as *mate* or *dude*. While the latter has undergone extensive pragmaticalisation and desemanticisation – shedding gendered and deictic constraints, thus becoming more broadly usable as identity and relationship markers – *love* remains tethered to its residual semantics of affect, intimacy and authority/compliance and gender⁶ associations, which, together with the pervasive link with intergenerational address patterns, appear to work against its wider social and geographical proliferation. Consequently, *love* likely remains a resilient localised feature that reinforces regional distinctiveness precisely because its indexicalities are not easily transferable to an ‘outgroup’. While *love* occurs in media representations of ‘northern’ speech, it is notably not widely present on cultural artefacts. This may indicate that, first, its local nostalgic-folkloric meaning is not prominent enough for decontextualised use outside a communicative situation; second, the indexical link with affective address is stronger than the link with the place-bound cultural meaning; or third, that the place-bound identity is not socio-demographically inclusive enough.

These conclusions must remain tentative, however, as this study relies on non-random convenience sampling and reflects the specific metapragmatic landscape of the Sheffield area rather than the broader Yorkshire or northern region. Nonetheless, the results provide empirical support for the idea that – like familiarisers – endearments have high indexical potential as active sites of socially consequential identity performance and cultural boundary demarcation. Lastly, although not by design, this study is based mainly on majority ethnic understandings: Subsequent research should examine the use and perception of endearments among northern residents from diverse ethnic backgrounds. A study focusing on how ethnic minority communities in the North engage with or are excluded from these enregistered local markers would offer valuable insights into the intersections of regionalism, ethnicity, and social integration.

Data Availability Statement

The survey questionnaire is archived in the University of Sheffield Online Research Data (ORDA) repository and is available via its persistent DOI (Baumgarten 2026).

Ethics Approval

This research has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield’s Ethics Review Procedure (REF 048583).

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Endnotes

¹ Established and Newcomer males: significant at $p < .01$ (χ^2 (1, $N = 153$) = 9.26, $p = .002$); Newcomer females and Newcomer males: significant at $p < .05$ (χ^2 (1, $N = 252$) = 5.16, $p = .025$).

² Acquaintance: χ^2 (1, $N = 271$) = 15.74, $p = .00007$; stranger: χ^2 (1, $N = 254$) = 15.87, $p = .00007$; work colleague: χ^2 (1, $N = 267$) = 13.54, $p = .0002$; boss/manager: χ^2 (1, $N = 258$) = 12.45, $p = .0004$; doctor/GP: χ^2 (1, $N = 254$) = 11.87, $p = .0006$; teacher/professor: χ^2 (1, $N = 250$) = 5.82, $p = .016$; sibling: χ^2 (1, $N = 262$) = 4.59, $p = .032$.

³ Included are categorisations made in at least one quarter of the responses submitted for an individual question.

⁴ Examples in single quotation marks are verbatim from the data. Minimal orthographic corrections have been made in some instances to improve readability.

⁵ Social desirability bias may also account for this.

⁶ Absence of gender and sex meanings in *love* as well as the use in male–male constellations are mentioned in a very small number of accounts (<5) and are not discussed here.

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