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The Communicative Architecture of Stigma: Examining the Everyday Language on Homelessness

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ABSTRACT

Stigma is a powerful force of social exclusion, yet the everyday communicative practices through which it is reproduced remain underexamined. This study investigates how stigma against people experiencing homelessness is embedded in ordinary discourse. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of UK Twitter posts (2019–2021) identified as stigmatising by individuals with lived experience of homelessness. Analysis revealed seven key bases of perceived differences upon which stigma of homelessness was constructed: appearance and hygiene, perceived deviant behaviour, dehumanisation, personal deficiency, social status, addiction and social undesirability. Crucially, stigma appeared not only in direct commentaries on homelessness but also in jokes, comparisons and casual remarks where homelessness was not the main topic. Based on this work, we theorise about the *communicative architecture of stigma* based on a shared system of symbolic shorthands and negative labelling of differences. We outline two key processes of *Performative Invocation* and *Boundary Policing* that reinforce stigma in everyday communication. Together, these dynamics contribute to the *Passive Perpetuation* of stigma, whereby negative meanings become socially accepted and embedded in common discourse. The paper highlights the fundamental role of communication in creating and perpetuating stigma and calls for greater attention to mundane communication as a site of community-level stigmatisation.

Stigma refers to the discrediting of people or groups due to certain attributes or characteristics and results in the social disqualification. Stigmatised groups are considered 'less than' others in the society and often experience both direct and indirect discrimination (Pescosolido et al. 2008). The origins of stigma lie in the differences that exist between people and underlying attributes that can span a wide range of differences including biological (e.g., race, Howarth 2006) and cultural (e.g., foreign accents, Birney et al. 2020) differences, personal choices (e.g., tattos, Broussard and Harton 2018), and other aspects of one life and experiences (e.g., sexwork, Hammond and Kingston 2014). However, stigma does not emerge from an inherent property of any of these attributes but from the way society develops a corpus of negative ideas around them. The inferior status and the negative attitudes towards stigmatised groups result from social selection of the attributes and the social construction of the negative regard. Stigma relies on the *assignment of negative meanings* to the differences in attributes and characteristics and as a result of such a process of social construction, it is seen as '*something in the person* rather than a designation or tag that others affix to the person' (Link and Phelan 2001, emphasis added). Put simply, stigma is socially constructed and understanding the construction of difference must be the first task in studying any form of social stigma.

1 | Homelessness as a Stigmatised Identity

Homelessness in the United Kingdom (UK) has been rising by as much as 14% every year as the housing crisis escalates

(Shelter 2023). Beyond the mere absence of a safe, secure dwelling and homelessness also results in the social exclusion of people in ways that extend far beyond physical displacement.

The pervasive social stigma around homelessness transforms it from a housing issue to a deeply problematic and discrediting identity. The predominant social discourse frames homelessness as an individual failure, often relying on stereotypical beliefs around laziness, moral deficiency, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness and unemployment while systemic issues like poverty and housing shortages get ignored (Hopper 2003; Knecht and Martinez 2009; Phelan et al. 1997; Snow and Anderson 1993). Such stereotypes around personal failure reduce a complex and varied experience of homelessness to a set of shared negative characteristics (McCarthy 2013) and become the primary lens through which society constructs and perceives the homeless identity.

The social stigma of homelessness results in discrimination and harassment and ultimately reduces people to a 'less than' status and inferior to the housed population (Hodgetts et al. 2010). The negative stereotypes associated with homelessness make it harder for people to seek help or advocate for better rights (Bos et al. 2013). At an interpersonal level, the stigmatising beliefs are connected to people's experiences of being ignored and treated with hostility (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004). The continuous exposure to social mistrust and apathy compels individuals to withdraw from social interactions, creating a cycle of isolation that further erodes self-esteem and reinforces negative self-perceptions (Rea 2023). These experiences of persistent stigmatisation lead to what Goffman (1963) describes as 'spoiled identities', where external perceptions of worthlessness are internalised. Ultimately, as Farrugia (2011, 72) notes, the stigma becomes a 'symbolic burden' shaping the sense of selves of people experiencing homelessness in the long term.

2 | Language, Communication and Stigma: A Conceptual Framework

The development of social stigma involves a series of interrelated processes that are inherently communicative and socially constructed (Link and Phelan 2001). At its core, stigma arises from isolating specific differences between individuals and associating them with negative attributes. The social construction of stigma is highly context dependent as not all the points of difference between people become the basis of stigma. For example, anthropological studies, such as Anderson-Fye's (2004) work in San Andrés, Belize, illustrate that fatness was once celebrated but became stigmatised globally through the influence of Western media propagating thin-body ideals (Brewis et al. 2011). Thus, whether differences are physical (e.g., fatness, skin colour), behavioural (e.g., smoking, drug use), or circumstantial (e.g., homelessness, imprisonment), stigma emerges not from the differences themselves but from the social processes that imbue them with negative meanings.

Language and communication play a fundamental role in the social construction of stigma in two related domains. The first, and a more surface-level domain, is that of derogatory labels and terms that are used to refer to stigmatised groups. On the surface, the words we use to label or describe groups often perpetuate stigma by embedding and reinforcing negative representations. Derogatory terms, such as 'crazy', 'nutter' and 'loony', have a well-documented history of perpetuating mental health stigma (Bowen et al. 2019; Grover et al. 2020; Howe et al. 2014; Hwang and Hollingshead 2016). Similarly, in the context of homelessness, labels such as 'bums', 'vagrants', and 'hobos' evoke stereotypes of irresponsibility, danger and moral failure. These terms do more than describe: they homogenise diverse individuals into a single stigmatised identity that embodies shared societal beliefs and stereotypes. However, it is important to recognise that such terms are but linguistic containers of the shared beliefs and representations that people hold towards people experiencing homelessness.

These shared representations form the second domain—the domain of common beliefs and ideas associated with people belonging to certain categories. These underlying beliefs are particularly problematic and pervasive as their consensual nature makes them the basis of general communication in society. Consider the following exchange:

> **Ali:** Mate, you look homeless!
>
> **Bob:** Haha ... Yes ... I desperately need a haircut.
>
> **Ali:** Yes, you do!

Here, Ali draws on a representation linking homelessness to dishevelled appearance. For Bob to understand and respond to this comment, he must share, or at least be familiar with, the underlying societal belief connecting homelessness with the implied physical appearance. In this instance, Ali's implicature relies on the assumption that Bob would be able to interpret the meaning. Indeed, the communication is successful and highlights how everyday conversations often become the vehicle for negative, and often incorrect, beliefs about stigmatised identities. As the example highlights, these kinds of communicative acts are particularly pernicious as the object of stigma need not be involved in the communication, nor be the topic of it.

To conclude, in order to understand and address the stigma surrounding homelessness, this research integrates two key insights. *First*, it examines the ways in which those experiencing homelessness are deemed different from others, either explicitly or implicitly. By focusing on how these differences are constructed or referenced in social interactions, the study reveals the representations and underlying beliefs that circulate within British society and form the basis of homeless stigma. *Second*, the research identifies the conversational contexts in which stigmatising language about homelessness frequently emerges.

By analytically disentangling the *basis* of stigma (i.e., in what ways are those experiencing homelessness believed to be different) from the *communicative contexts* in which these distinctions are deployed, this approach offers a significant conceptual

advance in understanding how stigma is operationalised in everyday communications. In doing so, the current work extends the work of Kim et al. (2021) by examining how attributes are not merely ascribed but are actively made relevant within everyday specific conversational contexts. Thus, our aim is to explore not only what people believe about homelessness, but also in what contexts these beliefs become communicatively functional. This distinction is critical as it moves the analysis beyond cataloguing stereotypes to interrogating the everyday discursive landscape where stigmatising beliefs are mobilised in the service of pragmatic communicative goals.

3 | Methods

In order to explore how homelessness features in everyday conversations, we examined data from British users of Twitter (X). The choice of this social media platform was purposeful; as compared to other internet fora like Reddit, people are more likely to have their real identities and social networks associated with their Twitter accounts. Therefore, the language used on Twitter is likely to provide a higher degree of naturalism compared with either a research interview, where people tend to be very careful in the language they use, or Reddit and 4Chan, where anonymity tends to promote extreme discourse.

Publicly available Twitter posts were used in this study; this part of the empirical work was exempt from ethics review. Twitter posts from the UK between 01 January 2019 and 31 December 2021 were searched with a wildcard keyword 'homeles*' to sample the language and communication on homelessness in the public domain. Tweets returned in the search were cleaned to remove any retweets reposting the same message, posts from accounts demonstrating bot-like behaviour, and messages that were not in English. Details of data cleaning are available in the Supporting Information. The final corpus contained 4505 messages where homelessness appeared in people's online communication. A collaborating organisation working in the homelessness sector (Centre for Homelessness Impact) was interested in examining a set of terms and phrases commonly used in the sector (see Supporting Information). Twitter accounts of prominent charities and government departments were examined for posts containing these phrases, and a further 915 messages were added to the corpus.

Another methodological decision in the project was to involve people with lived experience of homelessness in the identification of problematic language. This approach reflects a growing recognition that those directly affected by homelessness possess unique interpretive insights into how stigma and misrepresentation operate in everyday discourse. Rather than treating experiential knowledge as supplementary, this study positions it as central to evaluating communicative harm. As the work of Crooks et al. (2024) shows, incorporating lived experience can lead to more accurate insights into the lived realities of homelessness in research. Therefore, the corpus of 5420 messages was divided in sets of 217 and shared with 25 pairs of people with lived experience of homelessness[1] who were recruited through the network of [anonymised partner organisation]. This phase of the study was reviewed by the High-Risk Ethics Committee of the University of Brighton and received full approval. These colleagues read each message and considered if it portrayed homelessness, or those experiencing it, in a negative light. 943 of these were identified as instances of problematic language use by both raters in the pair and formed the final dataset used in the study. Table 1 provides the details.

We analysed these 943 instances of people talking about homelessness following a directed qualitative content analysis approach in line with Hsieh and Shannon (2005). For the first research question (differences), the focus was on the differences that were labelled in the message. Accordingly, each message was analysed for the nature of difference portrayed, representations of threat, evidence of enactment of stigma (including discrimination) and comments about helping people experiencing homelessness. This part of the coding process was inductive but to devise a consistent approach, both researchers (AC, JF) independently coded a 5% sample (50 messages) and met to refine the codes around the nature of differences. For each message, up to two bases of differences were noted by each coder, and detailed observations were made around issues of threat, enactment of stigma and helping. Cohen's Kappa was calculated to establish intercoder reliability. AC and JF blindly coded a further 50 texts and the general level of agreement was substantial ($\kappa = 0.69$). These bases of differences are discussed in detail within the results section.

For the second research question, a deductive approach was used. A codebook was deployed where each message was rated for its clarity and suitability for analysis, and the context of communication. The codebook initially contained three communicative contexts based on our review of literature (Interaction, Observation and Humour) but after an initial coding of 50 texts by each coder, refinements were made.

TABLE 1 | Rating of messages by people with lived experiences of homelessness.

Rating category	*N*	%	Action
Judged 'negative' by both raters	943	17.4	Included in the final analysis
Judged 'negative' by only one rater[a]	1846	34.1	Excluded from the final analysis
Not judged 'negative' by either rater[b]	1374	25.4	Excluded from the final analysis
Other (rated not relevant by both or missing data)	1257	23.2	Excluded from the final analysis
Total	5420	100	

[a]While this was not undertaken in the current project, we note that this category contains potentially interesting corpus of boundary cases. We aim to look at these in more detail in a follow up work.
[b]A significant portion of these messages used the study's keyword 'homeless' in a metaphorical or descriptive sense, rather than referring to the actual social issue of homelessness. For instance, the term 'politically homeless' appeared in a number of messages, describing individuals who did not support a political party, abandoned their old party and were without one, or indeed who felt that no political party represented their views. Similarly, a large number of them were plain statements mentioning the possibility of becoming homeless or presenting statistical information on rough sleeping and homelessness. The dataset also contained a number of tweets that were empathetic and highlighted the structural factors at play.

Two new categories were added ('Reference'; 'Observation') and the category 'Humour' was extended to also include 'Comparisons' Intercoder reliability for the five categories was checked on 50 random messages and once again was found to be substantial ($\kappa = 0.67$).

The next two sections present the results of the study. We first present our findings around the *basis of homelessness stigma* to build an answer towards the first research question. Findings related to the second research question are presented thereafter.

4 | Bases of Homelessness Stigma

Seven overall bases of differences emerged from the tweets. These were: differences in appearance and hygiene, behavioural differences, association with diseases and lacking human qualities, differences around life choices or personal deficiency, status differences, differences around substance use and addiction and social and relational undesirability. In just under 6% of messages, there was no clear labelling of difference, and the only common theme in these messages was the mention of homelessness not serving any discernible purpose.

4.1 | Appearance and Hygiene—Homogenising Homelessness

Analysis revealed that differences in appearance and hygiene constituted one of the most prevalent bases for stigmatising language, accounting for 18.32% of all instances where people experiencing homelessness were labelled as different. The language used frequently highlighted perceived deviations from social norms around physical appearance, including references to clothing, personal grooming and hygiene. A key finding was the tendency to homogenise the appearance of people experiencing homelessness, suggesting a shared and identifiable 'homeless look'. This was evident in statements like 'They all look so similar: weather-beaten, missing teeth, skinny, old beyond their years' (§ 5).[2] References to hygiene and body odour, often expressing disgust or discomfort to others, were also common. These references ranged from direct comments about smell to more subtle implications about cleanliness. Two illustrations from the data are presented below:

> I really detest the smell of the homeless 😭 (§ 13)

> Having a serious self-care night tonight. Already showered, washed my hair and shaved my legs, just cleansed and popped a face mask on, next it'll be a nice blow dry and popping a load of fake tan on 👌🟫 At that point where I'm looking legitimately like homeless scruff🤦‍♀️ (§ 12)

The use of the homeless appearance trope as a negative reference point was a noteworthy feature of the corpus where when feeling unkempt, individuals tend to describe themselves as 'looking homeless' (§ 2, 4, 12). This linguistic strategy suggests a widespread tendency to use homelessness as a universally understood shorthand for poor appearance or hygiene.

4.2 | Behavioural Differences—Strangeness and Threat

In 15.89% of instances, stigmatising representations of homelessness involved highlighting behavioural differences, especially those portraying people experiencing homelessness as strange and dangerous. The differences clustered around several key themes: threatening or violent behaviour, verbal abuse, anti-social conduct, criminal activities and general labelling of 'unusual' behaviour.

Mentions of threats to one's physical safety was a prominent idea here. For instance, one account described 'some homeless man approach me threatening me to take £10 out for him or he was gonna batter me' (Message 22), while another reported someone from a homeless shelter 'running up and down the road with a 12 inch knife' (§ 23). Verbal abuse was another idea that was frequently observed. These ranged from direct confrontations—'F off away from me' (§ 26), to more complex interactions such as attempts at assistance resulting in verbal aggression: 'called me selfish and said I was what is wrong with the world after I bought him some food' (§ 27). § 26 is particularly interesting and worth quoting in full as it not only mentions such verbal abuse, but also shows author's belief that people experiencing homelessness are likely to take people for 'a ride'.

> Homeless guy told said "F off away from me" earlier. I was probably 50 yards away from him. I was so shocked I said "pardon?" and he said it again. Charming chap! Didn't get a ride out of me like he probably wanted though.

The data also suggest that everyday anti-social behaviour tends to get attributed specifically to homelessness status of people. The assumed housing status of people was explicitly mentioned as relevant context when describing people 'shouting obscenities' and 'fighting outside my house' (§ 31, 33). Criminal behaviour, particularly theft, also featured prominently (§ 35–38) and both drew on and reinforced negative stereotypes about the trustworthiness of those without a home. The following quote, presented in full, shows how such ideas circulating in the public may make people less inclined to help.

> I'm actually crying. Poppy told me last night she invited homeless people back to hers and they have stolen her clothes and phone chargers😭😂

Additionally, behaviours deemed 'unusual' or difficult to understand were often highlighted ('sweeping a car park' [§ 41] or 'wrestling with his own sleeping bag' [§ 43]) and served to associate strangeness with people experiencing homelessness.

4.3 | Infrahumanisation—Association With Diseases and Lacking Human Qualities

The most extreme form of stigmatising language involved associating people experiencing homelessness with diseases and dehumanisation. This linguistic pattern emerged in several distinct but interrelated ways, reflecting what Leyens et al. (2007)

describe as infrahumanisation, where out-groups are perceived as lacking uniquely human attributes.

A particularly concerning manifestation involved direct associations between homelessness and infectious diseases. For instance, one message explicitly linked homelessness with AIDS in a derogatory manner, with a generous dose of racism: 'David De Gea [football goalkeeper] could bang a tribe of homeless Africans and still keep the aids out 👏👏👏👏' (§ 45). Another example is of messages directly attributed unique 'germs' to people experiencing homelessness: 'Is it just me that doesn't touch hand rails in Birmingham because I'm afraid of the homeless people germs I'll get' (§ 46). The dehumanising discourse extended to explicit animalistic comparisons, with some messages referring to people experiencing homelessness as 'vermin' (§ 47).

The time period studied also covered the COVID-19 pandemic which provided a new context where this form of stigmatisation was visible in people questioning the human vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness. Messages questioned why those sleeping rough weren't getting seriously ill despite lacking washing facilities (§ 49, 52). While not dehumanising, such messages suggest that people living in the streets are fundamentally different from other human beings.

Perhaps most insidiously, dehumanisation occurred through language that evoked disgust, a mechanism known to facilitate outgroup dehumanisation (Buckels and Trapnell 2013). This was evident in descriptions of physical conditions that provoke disgust reactions, such as references to maggot-infested wounds (§ 50) and body odour (§ 96–98, also discussed earlier). Even when the intent was not explicitly stigmatising, such descriptions contributed to what Link and Phelan (2001) consider the social construction of difference and separation.

Finally, data also revealed instances of commodification, where people experiencing homelessness were treated as objects of curiosity rather than human beings, exemplified by references to 'guided tour of the homeless' (151). This objectification represents a form of what Goffman (1963) termed 'civil death', where stigmatised individuals are treated as non-persons in social interactions.

4.4 | Life Choices or Personal Deficiency—The Notion of Deservingness

Differences framed in terms of life choices and personal deficiencies accounted for 14.63% of labelling in the dataset. Here, the focus was on dispositional attributions that implied homelessness to be a direct consequence of individual failings rather than structural conditions.

The language of blame was apparent in discussions of substance use, which was frequently mentioned in conjunction with homelessness in ways that assumed causality. Descriptors such as 'a crackhead homeless man' (§ 117) or 'pissed homeless fellas' (§ 121) position substance use as an inherent characteristic of those experiencing homelessness and becomes markers of difference from those who are not.

A key aspect of the underlying beliefs was the construction of homelessness as a matter of choice, with several messages framing it as a voluntary condition linked to a lack of personal qualities. Take § 79 for example which suggests that rough sleeping is nothing more than a choice not to be housed in homeless shelters because of the 'rules and regulations' that come with it. Our analysis suggests that the phrase 'homeless through no fault of their own' and its related versions were particularly problematic as they normalise an implicit distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' individuals. For example, one user noted, 'Just had a chat with a homeless lad outside Liverpool Street. On the street through no fault of his own. Despite everything, he could smile & look for positives' (§ 55). While seemingly sympathetic, this language inadvertently reinforces the idea that some people do not merit support because their homelessness is a result of personal failure rather than an involuntary crisis.

Another common aspect of stigmatising language was the association of homelessness with negative character traits such as laziness, greed and ungratefulness (§ 54–68). Data showed a tendency to portray people experiencing homelessness as deceitful or exploitative, taking advantage of public goodwill. For instance, a user expressed frustration with a person experiencing homelessness who, after being given new jackets, responded with 'Thanks. Have you also got any spare change?' (§ 60). Such communicative acts reinforce a stereotype of persistent neediness and entitlement. Similarly, another message claimed, 'Some of them are making over £100 a night, all for being lazy gets, preying on people's goodwill' (§ 61). These ideas portray those experiencing homelessness as different from others by portraying them as manipulative and extracting.

Data also showed a tendency to imply that people experiencing homelessness should not have certain material goods and conform to an expectation of absolute and visible deprivation. This was often married to the idea of financial irresponsibility and implied a prioritisation of luxuries over basic needs. Take the following two messages for example:

> I've seen it all now … Homeless man in manny [Manchester] wearing Vapormax's [a shoe brand] 🙃🙃🙃 (§ 83)

> Why am I giving a homeless women a fiver because I have had a few drinks & she's giving it a sob story in a new Nike hoodie (§ 86)

These narratives capture the societal expectation that poverty must be visible and performative to be deemed legitimate. To conclude, the differences on this theme emphasise individual blame over structural factors and portray homelessness as a personal failure linked to shortcomings in responsibility, morality and merit.

4.5 | Undesirability—Being at the Bottom of the Pile

The theme of undesirability contributed significantly to the portrayal of those experiencing homelessness as different from

others. The construction of undesirability manifested in three distinct forms: spatial, relational and sexual undesirability.

Spatial undesirability was frequently expressed through language that portrayed the presence of people experiencing homelessness as an indicator of urban decay. Consider this illustrative message:

> Even walking through the city centre at 9 on a late-night shopping night you can sense it's gone downhill a lot from a decade ago. Few shoppers, shops closing earlier. Mostly tourists, druggies and the homeless left on the streets (§ 109)

Here, the spatial undesirability of homelessness is constructed through multiple linguistic devices. There is a temporal comparison to suggest deterioration and a categorical distinction between desirable presences ('shoppers') and undesirable ones ('druggies and the homeless'). Once again, street homelessness is taken as the only form of homelessness and presented as the evidence of urban decline. Similar sentiments were expressed about various locations, with messages describing city centres as 'depressing' (§ 111) or 'grim' (§ 113), specifically due to the presence of people experiencing homelessness.

Data showed that people experiencing homelessness were also used as reference points for social rejection or unattractiveness. Messages frequently employed such comparisons in self-deprecating contexts. Take the example below where a person suggests that 'looking homeless' prevents them from being romantically attractive.

> [...] You read stories about people meeting the loves of their lives in Tesco [...] HOW?! Only looks I get off men when I'm in Sainsbury's is a look of "How the fuck can she afford to shop here she looks homeless." (§ 103)

Similarly, sexual undesirability was expressed through messages that treated intimate relationships with people experiencing homelessness as either humorous impossibilities or acts of desperation, as evident in 'seen a fit lad on the bus today but I think he was homeless 🤣🤣🤣🤣' (§ 100) and 'Bolllox! I'm feeling that horny, I might go into town and get a homeless bird, give her a bath and shag her ... 😂😂😂'. Data show that this is likely a shared belief that allows the communicator to not be explicit about the premise as in the case of the following post: 'I'd legit shag a homeless man for a pint right now' (§ 101).

The theme of undesirability in language about homelessness reveals how stigma manifests through exclusion in both social and public, and intimate spaces. Whether through depictions of urban decline, comparisons that portray PEH as the lowest social group, or avoidance-based rhetoric, such language contributes to the broader marginalisation of those who are homeless.

4.6 | Substance Abuse and Addiction

When discussing those experiencing homelessness, substance-related descriptors were often used speculatively or unnecessarily. These associations operated on multiple levels. At the most direct level, people used explicit drug-related terminology as descriptors, creating a problematic conflation between homelessness and substance use. Terms like 'crackhead homeless man' (§ 117), 'homeless junkies' (§ 118) and 'pissed homeless fellas' (§ 121) were common in the data. However, even seemingly sympathetic messages indirectly portrayed people as different by assuming universal substance misuse among people experiencing homelessness. For example:

> A tough couple of days at and around out hostel. If you're out and about and come across some homeless guys, treat them to a couple of litres of water if you can. Substance and alcohol misuse doesn't suit this weather. 👍 A small gesture can make a big difference. (§ 127)

The message here is of sympathy and asking the public to help people experiencing homelessness on hot days. At the same time, it implicitly suggests that all homeless individuals misuse substances. Substance use was often portrayed as a spectacle in public spaces, with messages describing people 'shooting up in KFC' (115) or 'smoking crack at the bus stop' (122). Such descriptions not only sensationalised substance use but also reinforced the theme of spatial undesirability discussed earlier.

4.7 | Status Differences—Portraying Homelessness as Automatic Disqualification

Stigmatising communication also relied on shared assumptions about the lower social status of people experiencing homelessness. Different from explicit derogation, these status differences were often embedded within seemingly casual communications, and the communication of intended meanings relied on both parties in the conversation sharing an unstated belief about homelessness representing a discredited social position. This implicit status hierarchy was particularly evident in messages that used homelessness as a reference point for social comparison or self-deprecation. Consider this illustrative exchange:

> Quality of football commentary in descending order: Sky, Amazon, BBC, Antonio Gubba on Chanel Neus, My Wife with no knowledge of football, the drunk homeless bloke who wanders around our town shouting at things, BT Sport. (§ 140)

The comedic effect of this message depends entirely on the shared understanding that commentary from 'the homeless bloke' would be worthless or nonsensical. By positioning this hypothetical commentary below even that of someone with 'no knowledge of football', the author reinforces a social hierarchy where homeless individuals occupy the lowest rung, with their perspectives deemed inherently invalid or absurd. Interestingly, in passing, the message also reinforces the stereotypical beliefs about substance abuse ('drunk') and unusual behaviour (wandering around, shouting at things) as discussed previously.

The assumed lower status of people experiencing homelessness was also evident in expressions of surprise when this hierarchy appeared to be disrupted. Consider the following message: 'I just got given food by a homeless guy and I'm just so confused how that even happens' (§ 147). Here, the author's declared confusion at receiving assistance from someone experiencing homelessness reveals an underlying assumption that such individuals occupy a social position where they should always be recipients rather than providers of help. The reversal of the expected status relationship is so incongruous as to be almost incomprehensible, thereby reinforcing the very hierarchy it should have breached.

These examples demonstrate how status-based stigma tends to propagate through implicit shared understandings rather than overt expressions of prejudice. The effectiveness of such communications relies on audiences recognising and accepting unstated assumptions about the diminished social standing of people experiencing homelessness. This was evident across multiple contexts: expressing embarrassment at being mistaken for someone experiencing homelessness (§ 141 and 142), using homelessness as shorthand for personal failure (§ 132), and suggesting that receiving critique from someone experiencing homelessness was inherently invalid (§ 144 and 145). Even seemingly sympathetic messages (e.g., § 148) often reinforced status differences.

5 | The Contexts of Stigmatising Communication

Our second research question investigated the communicative contexts within which stigmatising ideas about homelessness appear. As discussed previously, working both deductively and inductively, five categories of communicative contexts were identified: Interactions with people experiencing homelessness (or assumed to be); Direct observations about homelessness; Comments about homelessness; References to homelessness when discussing other issues; and making comparisons with people experiencing homelessness or using them in jokes. Table 2 presents the categories, their definition and scope, examples, and their occurrence within our data.

Some important insights about the communication of stigma emerge here. Interestingly, the largest proportion of stigmatising communication about homelessness (27%) was observed in the communicative context of making comparisons or attempting to create humour. This was followed by instances where the message described interacting with people who may have been assumed to be experiencing homelessness (23%), references made to homelessness when discussing some other social issue (21.5%), comments made on homelessness (16%) and direct observations of homelessness (12%). Table 3 provides a crosstabulation of our data along the bases of difference and the context of communication and opens up a key question: are some differences more or less likely to be highlighted in certain communicative contexts?

A series of separate 2×5 chi-square tests were conducted to examine the presence or absence of the bases of differences across the five communicative categories To test whether particular bases of social difference were distributed unevenly across communicative categories, a series of chi-square tests of independence (one for each basis of difference) were conducted. To adjust for multiple comparisons, Holm correction was applied to the resulting p-values (Holm 1979). Seven of the eight tests yielded statistically significant results after Holm correction, indicating non-random associations between communicative category and the presence of specific forms of difference: appearance and hygiene, $\chi^2(4) = 425.86$, $p < 0.001$; behavioural differences, $\chi^2(4) = 206.55$, $p < 0.001$; no explicit labelling, $\chi^2(4) = 162.66$, $p < 0.001$; life choices or personal deficiency, $\chi^2(4) = 148.16$, $p < 0.001$; undesirability, $\chi^2(4) = 58.12$, $p < 0.001$; status, $\chi^2(4) = 53.92$, $p < 0.001$; and substance use and addiction, $\chi^2(4) = 31.06$, $p < 0.001$. The test for infrahumanisation ($\chi^2(4) = 6.22$, $p = 0.18$) was not statistically significant.

To examine the structure of these associations, standardised residuals were extracted for each cell. Residuals greater than ± 1.96 were interpreted as statistically meaningful deviations from the expected frequency. Figure 1 presents a heatmap of the residuals, along with statistically significant values.

Stigma grounded in beliefs about appearance and hygiene was significantly overrepresented in comparison and humour-based communicative contexts (sr = 20.57, $p < 0.001$). This indicates a strong reliance on recognisable, surface-level cues when homelessness is invoked for symbolic contrast, self-deprecation, or ridicule. These beliefs were also significantly overrepresented in communication based on interactions with, or observations of, people experiencing homelessness (sr = 7.41 and 3.69, respectively, $p < 0.001$). It can be concluded that visible or aesthetic markers are a core dimension of homelessness stigma when people speak from direct exposure. In contrast, appearance-related framings were significantly underrepresented when homelessness was approached more reflectively in comments (sr = −4.60, $p < 0.001$) or when invoked only tangentially in references (sr = −7.63, $p < 0.001$).

Stigma linked to behavioural differences followed a similar contextual pattern. It was significantly overrepresented in messages describing interactions and observations (sr = 11, $p < 0.001$; 6.72, $p < 0.001$), but underrepresented in comparisons and humour (sr = −7.58, $p < 0.001$) and references (sr = −4.95, $p < 0.001$). Beliefs about personal deficiency and undesirability were significantly overrepresented in direct experience contexts (sr = 9.72, $p < 0.001$; 7.33, $p < 0.001$) and significantly underrepresented in symbolic (comparison/humour: sr = −7.17, $p < 0.001$) and referential contexts (sr = −6.04, $p < 0.001$). Taken together, these findings indicate that moralising attributions such as those involving agency, responsibility, or flawed character were particularly prominent when people describe having witnessed or interacted with individuals experiencing homelessness.

Status-based explanations showed significant overrepresentation in when people made tangential references (sr = 3.18, $p < 0.01$) where homelessness was invoked as an example of broader social inequality. Interestingly, references to homelessness also showed a striking overrepresentation of messages that did not have a clear labelling of difference (sr = 11.92, $p < 0.001$). From this, it is clear that homelessness is commonly understood

TABLE 2 | Communicative context to stigmatising beliefs about homelessness.

Category name and description	Codes	% of data[a]	Description	Examples
Clarity (evaluating the message for relevance and comprehension)	Acceptable	81.86%	The text is readable, in English, and the meaning is clear	—
	Indecipherable or not pertinent	18.13%	Text too short, not all in English, or meaning not clear; text contains the keyword but is not within the scope of the project	*Eh homeless ... kya gandagi failaye hai yaar!* *Until the new stadium is ready, Spurs are homeless.*
Context of communication (identifying the context of communication. What does the message describe?)	Interaction (Self or Other)	23.06%	Text contains the author's (Self's) or another person's (Other) direct interaction with person(s) experiencing homelessness. Use of either of these two codes require a direct interactive contact with person(s) experiencing homelessness including verbal (e.g., a conversation) and non-verbal (e.g., nodding) exchanges, as well as physical interactions (e.g., hugging, pushing)	*It felt nice talking to an elderly homeless woman today. Made me appreciate what I have.* (conversational interaction, code with 'Interaction—Self') *Some homeless bloke pushed my brother yesterday* (physical interaction—code with 'Interaction—Other') *Some homeless bloke abused me and my brother yesterday.* (example boundary defining case involving verbal interaction with both Self and Other—in these situations, use 'Interaction—Self') *Got flashed by a homeless bloke today. Welcome to London!* (example boundary defining case where non-verbal interaction takes place, code with Interaction—Self)
	Observation (Self or Other)	12.31%	Text says something about homelessness or people experiencing it based on one's own (Self) or someone else's observation (Other), excluding instances of interaction defined above. Seeing or hearing the event being described directly is essential. The text may now merely be a remark on homelessness or people experiencing it—an observation is essential	*As I was walking past the train station, a homeless man was giving people flowers* (Observation—Self) *My tutor saw a homeless woman get abused today.* (Observation—Other) Negative example: *Why do homeless people have dogs?* (No direct observation clear, this is merely a comment)
	Comment (Self or Other)	16.06%	Text contains thoughts on homelessness that do not involve a direct interaction or direct observation. This differs from the category 'Reference' where homelessness is not the main theme of the message	*My heart goes out to those living in our streets. It is so cold* (Comment—Self) *My friend Toby made a really good point—staying clean is the biggest problem of the homeless. I agree. Where do they go for a shower?* (Comment—Other)
	Comparison or humour	27.07%	Homelessness of those experiencing it are used as a foil for comparison either for oneself or others. The goal of comparison could range from self enhancement to self-deprecation Instances where homelessness is used as a trope for a humour	*I look so bad right now that people mistake me for homeless. Lol* (Comparison) *Is it ironic that the favoured drink of the homeless is Tenants Lager (Humour)?*
	Reference	21.5%	Text mentions homelessness/PEH but homelessness/PEH are not the focus of the message Any text assigned with this code should not involve a direct observation, interaction, or have H/PEH as the main idea	*Why are we letting so many immigrants in? This must stop. Our streets are full of homeless people born here. What has this country come to? People who served proudly in the British military are homeless and the government does not seem to care.*

[a]The percentages for the five communicative contexts exclude those rows in data that were coded as indecipherable or not pertinent.

TABLE 3 | Instances of labelling across different communicative contexts.

	Interactions	Observations	Comments	References	Comparison or humour
Appearance and hygiene	5	6	11	2	157
Behavioural differences	88	99	187	11	5
Infrahumanisation	1	1	2	4	0
Life choices or personal deficiency	82	90	172	6	7
No clear labelling	3	5	8	68	5
Status	65	73	138	71	41
Substance use and addiction	17	19	36	4	6
Undesirability	10	13	23	17	10

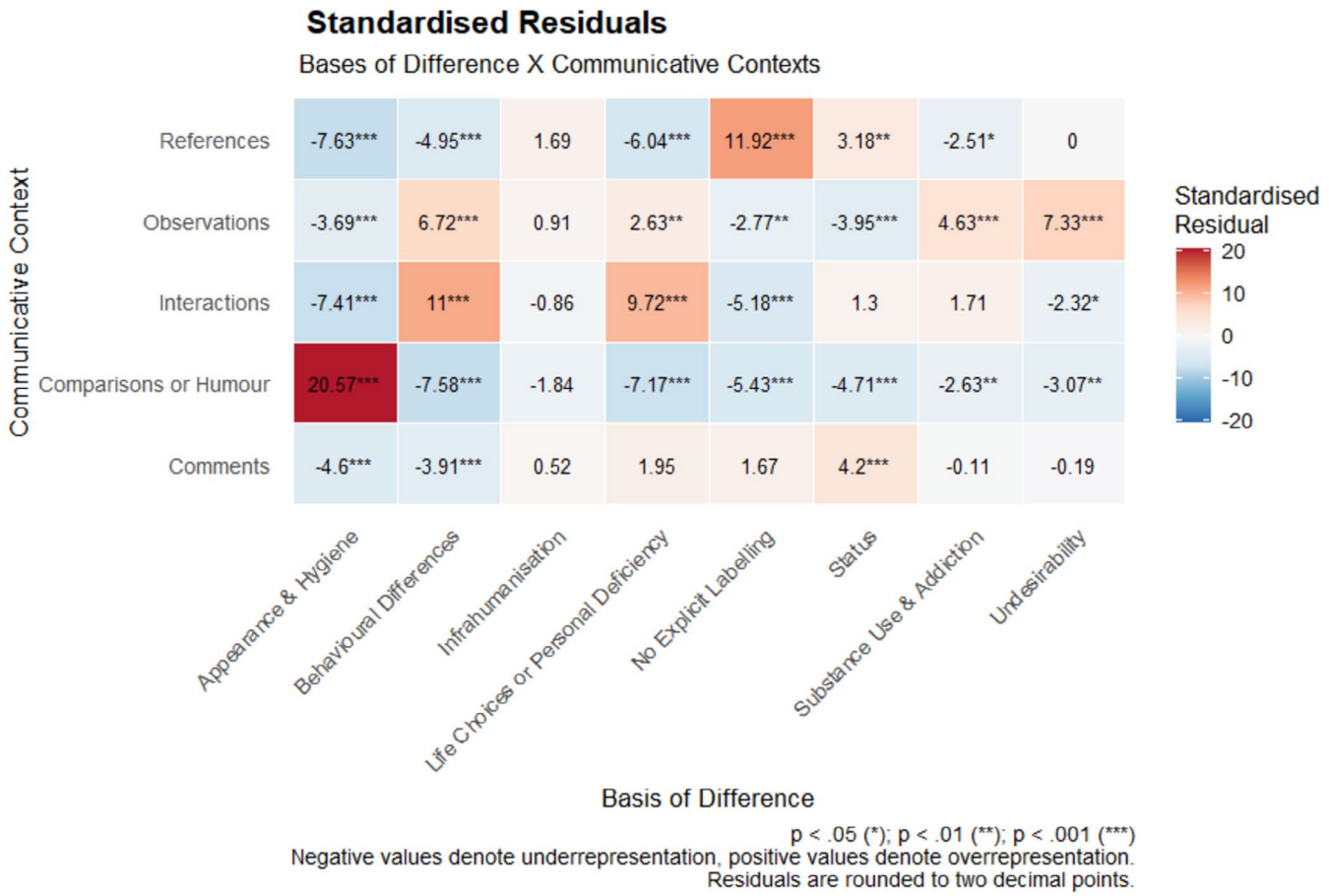

FIGURE 1 | Association between communicative context and basis of homelessness stigma.

as a state of personal failure without the need for explicit or indeed discernible differences.

Together, these patterns point towards an important conclusion: stigmatising beliefs towards the same stigmatised category or social group (such as homelessness) are functional in nature and can differ depending on the communicative goals and contexts within which they are invoked. This suggests that stigma around an identity is not merely multifaceted, but also embedded in a broader communicative architecture, wherein the content and the functions of the underlying social representations are intertwined.

6 | The Communicative Life of Social Stigma: Architecture, Invocation and Reinforcement

The dataset examined in this study included a range of representations of homelessness, many of which expressed sympathy, solidarity, or structural critique. These expressions form an important part of the broader discursive landscape; however, the focus of the current work remained specifically on stigmatising communication on homelessness. Our aim was to examine how stigmatising representations are structured, mobilised and embedded in everyday language use. While the majority of communication about homelessness in our dataset did not

express stigmatising beliefs, nearly one in five posts did. In the corpus we examined, homelessness was framed almost exclusively as street homelessness, with little recognition of other types of experiences of being unhoused. In part, this reflects the construction of the corpus around the keyword 'homeless*' and strongly suggests that other forms of it (e.g., sofa surfing or unstable housing) are more likely discussed through those specific terms. The term 'homeless' in the British communicative landscape appears to default to 'street homelessness'.

Our findings around the stigma of homelessness remain consistent with the existing literature within stigma research. We found aesthetics to be a prominent aspect of homelessness stigma, as noted by Jones et al. (1984). Homogenising beliefs about the appearance and hygiene of those living in the streets have previously been noted (Hodgetts et al. 2010; Radley et al. 2005) and our work also found strong evidence for them within the UK, along with evidence for dehumanising and infrahumanising language. In all these instances, disgust appears to be the common theme in the stigma towards people experiencing homelessness, and it is not surprising that it has been noted for its role in facilitating the dehumanisation of individuals and groups (Buckels and Trapnell 2013). Our study additionally showed homelessness to be associated with beliefs about illnesses and biological contamination. Persistent stereotypes portraying PEH as dangerous or unstable were also evident in our analysis, mirroring longstanding public perceptions about homelessness documented by Xu et al. (2024) and the analysis of tweets from the USA by Kim et al. (2021). Strong evidence of both implicit and explicit person-based attributions for homelessness, based on beliefs about substance use and a lack of positive qualities, were also found in this research. This positions homelessness as a stigmatised identity, the understanding of which is likely shaped by perceptions of onset controllability. Such beliefs not only elicit a lack of compassion but can also provoke overt hostility (Weiner et al. 1988), akin to what has been noted in the context of mental health stigma and the controllability of its onset (Foster 2003). What is more, the tendency to equate homelessness exclusively with rough sleeping reinforces the perception of controllability and sustains the belief that homelessness results from personal failure, and that its onset is attributable to individual deficiencies.

The significance of this research lies in demonstrating that the communicative context is not a neutral backdrop but a structuring force in the articulation of stigma. The observed systematic variation across different communicative contexts in our data highlights that not all bases of stigma around an identity circulate or remain active equally across different discursive environments. In this sense, our work has captured how stigma dimensions are differentially activated depending on communicative goals. People invoking homelessness for humour or comparisons, for instance, disproportionately mobilise visual and aesthetic tropes, whereas when describing interactions and observations, moral evaluations and behavioural stereotypes gain prominence. This patterned distribution suggests that specific stigmatising representations become more central within particular genres of everyday talk. Theories of stigma, therefore, must incorporate not only the symbolic and representational content but also the pragmatic architecture of communication. Stigma is reproduced not just in direct commentaries about the target group but also in mundane, everyday communication (e.g., jokes, casual remarks) which may not relate to the stigmatised identity at all. We have shown how even seemingly benign and humorous communicative acts can reinforce and, in a socially acceptable manner, weave stigmatising ideas into the fabric of daily life. Not limited just to homelessness, stigma against a group can flourish invisibly in mundane and acontextual everyday conversations. The very structure of stigma, as manifested in communication, enables specific interactional practices, which in turn contribute to the embedding and normalisation of that stigma within society.

The notion that communication draws on shared knowledge structures to achieve pragmatic efficiency is well established in social and cognitive psychology. Speakers often rely on conceptual shorthands and assumptions of common ground to convey meaning (Krauss and Fussell 1991, 1996), while processes of social categorisation tend to exaggerate intergroup distinctions and homogenise out-groups (Brewer 1991). Likewise, research in cultural and discursive psychology has shown how group representations evolve through repeated communicative acts, becoming stabilised over time (Guimond et al. 2017; Kashima 2000). Building on these foundations and the current work, we propose some theoretical concepts to delineate the relationship between language, communication and the reinforcement of stigma. Although developed in relation to homelessness, these concepts extend more broadly and foreground the patterned co-occurrence of symbolic content, communicative function and social context in communicative dynamics of social stigma. The framework theorises how stigmatising representations mobilised, regulated, shared, and ultimately embedded seamlessly in the fabric of everyday discourse.

The first of these is what we call the *communicative architecture of stigma*. It pertains to the way everyday communication simultaneously constructs and reveals the symbolic systems and the belief systems that support stigma against social groups. Based on the current work, two aspects of it are apparent. First, this architecture involves simplification and coding, reducing the complex realities of these groups into readily intelligible, negative symbolic codes. These elements become a communicative shorthand in the form of widely understood repositories of meanings which transcend specific context. A powerful example from the current work is the communicative shorthand of 'the homeless look', 'looking homeless' and other related codes alluding to appearance and hygiene aspects. Similarly, the invocation of 'homelessness' as the benchmark for absolute failure was another shorthand central to the communicative architecture of homelessness stigma. A communicative shorthand, stigmatising or otherwise, works because it taps into a shared, simplified understanding while transforming a social condition into a convenient signifier for various negative attributes. Second, despite involving simplification, the communicative architecture of stigma is not simplistic. It involves the dynamic linking of diverse, heterogeneous elements into complex assemblages of difference. As observed in the current study, in the context of homelessness stigma, communication actively forges connections between bodily states (appearance, hygiene), perceived behaviours (threat, addiction), moral judgements (laziness, deservingness), spatial associations (urban decay) and affective responses (disgust, fear). The assemblage of differences does not need to be fixed but can continually be (re)configured in communication and create a multifaceted, relational structure

of negative meaning. The *communicative architecture of stigma*, thus, comprises of both simplifying shorthands and complex assemblages and represents the cognitive, symbolic and relational map of the stigma made available through, and in, communication. The architecture must also be seen as stratified in a functional manner as different components of stigma are activated in different communicative contexts.

This architecture of stigma communication enables and shapes specific forms of active agentic social practice enacted through language. It becomes the key resource responsible for stigmatising ideas about a group to perpetuate even within acontextual communication. Two key interrelated practices observed in the current work were *Performative Invocation* and *Boundary Policing*. Performative invocation involves the strategic deployment of the communicative architecture, its shorthands and assembled meanings, to achieve immediate interactional goals often unrelated to homelessness or those experiencing it. Using homelessness as a punchline, as a tool for self-deprecation, or as a point of negative comparison leverages the shared negative understanding embedded in the architecture with performative effect (Austin, 1975). All these are instances of people actively using the available stigma structure, but in the process, every such communicative act involves *doing stigma*. In other words, each time such a communication occurs, the identity of homelessness is subjected to an automatic process of stigmatisation, even when this is not consciously intended. This is complemented by Boundary Policing, which we conceptualise as the communicative practice of actively monitoring, reinforcing, and sometimes sanctioning the social norms, behavioural expectations and material limits perceived to define the stigmatised category. When people express surprise at counter-normative behaviour (e.g., a person experiencing homelessness giving help) or show disapproval of 'inappropriate' possessions, they are policing the boundaries of the homeless identity using uses the established architecture to enforce the group's 'proper' place and limits. Both invocation and policing are performative acts that draw legitimacy from the underlying architecture and also maintain it. In that sense, they are the means by which that structure is actively brought into play, shaping social interactions and reinforcing hierarchies (cf. Foucault 2013).

Finally, the ongoing construction of this architecture and its continuous enactment through practices like Performative Invocation and Boundary Policing contributes to the long-term embedding and normalisation of stigma. We propose that this ultimately results in the *Passive Reinforcement of Stigma*. This is the process through which the meanings, assumptions, and affects associated with the stigma accumulate, solidify, and perpetuate within a community's discourse and shared understanding over time. This occurs through repeated peripheral or incidental expressions and exposures in everyday communication. Being peripheral and often not directed towards the specific group, communicative acts such as jokes, comparisons, and casual remarks, make many stigmatising ideas socially accepted in everyday communication. Like sediment layering over time, each communicative act referencing or invoking the stigma, even subtly, contributes to its persistence and taken-for-granted status. Crucially, this sedimentation process embeds not only cognitive stereotypes and social norms but also the associated affective appraisals. Depending on the specific group, feelings of disgust, fear, pity, or discomfort become habitually linked to the stigmatised group through repeated acts of incidental invocation. The latent and passive nature of the process is crucial to the temporal dimension of stigma reinforcement as it escapes overt attention and allows the structure (Architecture) and its active use (Invocation/Policing) become deeply ingrained, widely accepted, and hard to change within the collective consciousness. We propose that this is one of the key reasons for the enduring nature of social stigma where marginalised identities and their implicit social disqualifications become part and parcel of everyday knowledge.

To conclude, stigma has the dangerous ability of working invisibly in the background of mundane everyday conversations. The banality of the process—from its communicative structure, through interactional practice, to embedded consequences—underpins the profound and cyclical role of everyday language in the life of social stigma.

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A guide for using better language on homelessness was developed as part of this project and is availabe here: https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/homelessness-and-the-language-of-stigma.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the Supporting Information of this article.

Endnotes

[1] One pair received 212 messages to rate.

[2] A sample of tweets from the dataset are available in the Supporting Information. These have been numbered and for easy referencing and are organised under the themes reported here. § 5 refers to the 5th tweet in the list.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** Supporting Information.