

Covid-19 related risk communication strategy regarding the use of face masks in the Argentine Republic

Estrategia de comunicación de riesgos relacionada con el Covid-19 sobre el uso de mascarillas en la República Argentina

Estratégia de comunicação de risco relacionada à Covid-19 sobre o uso de máscaras na República Argentina

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Abstract

- **Background:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, face mask use became one of the most recommended interventions to reduce viral transmission however, the effectiveness of mask policies depended on the quality of governmental risk communication.
- **Objective:** To explore governmental risk communication strategies regarding face-mask use in Argentina during the first phases of the Covid-19 pandemic using Capability, Opportunity and Motivation (COM-B) framework.

- **Methods:** A qualitative content analysis was conducted of public available communication strategies disseminated between March 2020 to March 2021. Sources included National Governmental publications, and reports from international organizations. Communication material was analysed according to the COM-B framework.
- **Results:** Governmental communication campaigns strongly addressed the capability component promoting mask use. The Opportunity dimension was enhanced through coordinated governmental communication, however, socioeconomic inequalities limited opportunities for adherence among vulnerable populations. Motivation evolved through pandemic. During the initial stages, fear of infection and uncertainty contributed to high adherence to masking recommendations. Overtime, prolonged restrictions, and behavioral fatigue reduced public motivation. Contradictory behaviors by political leaders, highly publicized events involving inadequate compliance with preventive procedures, and the spread of misinformation on social media further weakened trust and may have undermined adherence.
- **Conclusion:** Argentina implemented extensive communication strategies that contributed to public awareness and early adoption of face masks during Covid-19 pandemic. Analyses using the COM-B framework demonstrated that communication efforts addressed behavioral capability and opportunity, but faced increasingly challenges in sustaining motivation over time. The findings highlight the importance of transparent, evidence-based communication, as well as the need for political role modeling and attention to socioeconomic barriers. Future public health emergency responses should integrate behavioral science frameworks with communication strategies tailored to vulnerable populations and changing social contexts.

Keywords: Covid-19; risk communication; face masks; COM-B model; public health

Resumen

- **Antecedentes:** Durante la pandemia del Covid-19, el uso de mascarillas se convirtió en una de las intervenciones más recomendadas para reducir la transmisión viral. Sin embargo, la eficacia de las políticas sobre mascarillas dependió de la calidad de la comunicación gubernamental de riesgos
- **Objetivo:** Explorar las estrategias gubernamentales de comunicación de riesgos relativas al uso de mascarillas en Argentina durante las primeras fases de la pandemia del Covid-19, utilizando el marco de Capacidad, Oportunidad y Motivación (COM-B).
- **Métodos:** Se realizó un análisis cualitativo de contenido de las estrategias de comunicación de acceso público difundidas entre marzo

de 2020 y marzo de 2021. Las fuentes incluyeron publicaciones gubernamentales nacionales e informes de organismos internacionales. El material de comunicación se analizó según el marco COM.

- **Resultados:** Las campañas de comunicación gubernamentales abordaron con fuerza el componente de capacidad al promover el uso de mascarillas. La dimensión de oportunidad se vio favorecida por una comunicación gubernamental coordinada; no obstante, las desigualdades socioeconómicas limitaron las oportunidades de adherencia entre las poblaciones vulnerables. La motivación evolucionó a lo largo de la pandemia. En las etapas iniciales, el miedo al contagio y la incertidumbre contribuyeron a una alta adherencia a las recomendaciones sobre el uso de mascarillas. Con el tiempo, las restricciones prolongadas y la fatiga conductual redujeron la motivación pública. Las conductas contradictorias de líderes políticos, los eventos muy difundidos que implicaban un cumplimiento inadecuado de las medidas preventivas y la propagación de información errónea en las redes sociales debilitaron aún más la confianza y pudieron haber socavado la adherencia.
- **Conclusión:** Argentina implementó amplias estrategias de comunicación que contribuyeron a la concienciación pública y a la adopción temprana de mascarillas durante la pandemia del Covid-19. Los análisis basados en el marco COM-B demostraron que los esfuerzos de comunicación abordaron la capacidad conductual y la oportunidad, pero enfrentaron desafíos crecientes para mantener la motivación a lo largo del tiempo. Los hallazgos subrayan la importancia de una comunicación transparente y basada en evidencia, así como la necesidad de que los líderes políticos den ejemplo y de prestar atención a las barreras socioeconómicas. Las futuras respuestas a emergencias de salud pública deberían integrar los aportes de las ciencias del comportamiento con estrategias de comunicación adaptadas a las poblaciones vulnerables y a los contextos sociales cambiantes.

Palabras clave: Covid-19; comunicación de riesgos; mascarillas; modelo COM-B; salud pública

Resumo

- **Antecedentes:** Durante a pandemia de Covid-19, o uso de máscaras consolidou-se como uma das principais medidas recomendadas para reduzir a transmissão viral. No entanto, a efetividade das políticas destinadas a promover seu uso esteve condicionada, entre outros fatores, pela qualidade e coerência das estratégias governamentais de comunicação de riscos.
- **Objetivo:** Explorar as estratégias governamentais de comunicação de riscos relacionadas ao uso de máscaras na Argentina durante as

primeiras etapas da pandemia de Covid-19, com base no modelo de Capacidade, Oportunidade e Motivação (COM-B).

- **Métodos:** Foi realizada uma análise qualitativa de conteúdo das estratégias de comunicação de acesso público divulgadas entre março de 2020 e março de 2021. As fontes analisadas incluíram publicações oficiais do Governo Nacional e relatórios elaborados por organismos internacionais. O material coletado foi analisado segundo as dimensões propostas pelo modelo COM-B.
- **Resultados:** As estratégias de comunicação governamental abordaram predominantemente a dimensão da capacidade, por meio da divulgação de informações destinadas a promover o uso adequado de máscaras. A dimensão da oportunidade foi favorecida por uma comunicação governamental coordenada; entretanto, as desigualdades socioeconômicas condicionaram as possibilidades de adesão de determinados grupos em situação de vulnerabilidade. A motivação apresentou variações ao longo do período analisado. Durante as etapas iniciais, o medo do contágio e a incerteza favoreceram uma elevada adesão às recomendações relacionadas ao uso de máscaras. Posteriormente, a prolongação das restrições e a fadiga comportamental contribuíram para uma redução progressiva da motivação. Além disso, os comportamentos contraditórios de alguns líderes políticos, a ampla divulgação de eventos nos quais se observava um cumprimento insuficiente das medidas preventivas e a circulação de informações falsas nas redes sociais afetaram a confiança da população e podem ter contribuído para o enfraquecimento da adesão.
- **Conclusão:** A Argentina implementou amplas estratégias de comunicação de riscos que contribuíram para aumentar a conscientização da população e favoreceram a adoção precoce do uso de máscaras durante a pandemia de Covid-19. A análise com base no modelo COM-B permitiu identificar que as ações de comunicação incidiram principalmente sobre a capacidade e a oportunidade para a adoção desse comportamento, embora tenham enfrentado dificuldades crescentes para manter a motivação ao longo do tempo. Os achados destacam a relevância do desenvolvimento de estratégias de comunicação transparentes, coerentes e fundamentadas em evidências, acompanhadas por um comportamento exemplar das lideranças políticas e por medidas destinadas a reduzir as barreiras socioeconômicas. Futuras respostas a emergências de saúde pública devem integrar as contribuições das ciências comportamentais a estratégias de comunicação adaptadas às características das populações vulneráveis e às transformações dos contextos sociais.

Palavras-chave: Covid-19; comunicação de riscos; máscaras; modelo COM-B; saúde pública

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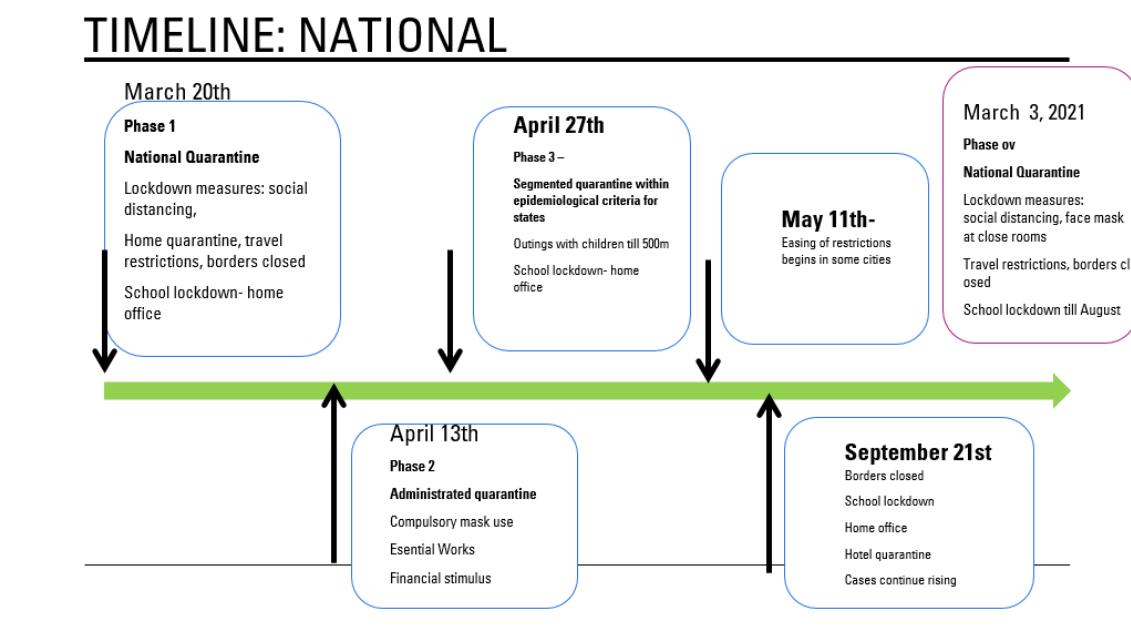


1. Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic represented one of the most important global public health emergencies of the twenty-first century. Since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic in March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020a), governments around the world adopted multiple strategies to reduce viral transmission and avoid collapse of health systems (World Health Organization, 2015, 2020a; Feng et al., 2020a). Among public health interventions like physical distancing, lockdowns, travel restrictions, hand hygiene, isolation procedures, and vaccination campaigns, the widespread promotion of face mask use became one of the most visible and controversial preventive behaviors globally (Kwon et al., 2021). Various studies are based on social phenomena resulting from the process of communication design during the lockdown due to Covid 19 (Altamirano et al., 2020; Losada, 2021, 2022; Losada & Peralta, 2022; Nogueira da Silva, 2022).

Figure 1

PEC Patient Education and Communication Journal



An effective “risk communication” (Abraham, 2009) scheme is considered a fundamental component of outbreak management. The WHO defines risk communication as the real-time exchange of information, advice, and opinions between experts, authorities, and people facing threats to their health or wellbeing (WHO, 2015, 2020a).

During pandemic, effective risk communication became particularly complex, because recommendations evolve rapidly as scientific evidence changes, requiring governments to balance urgency, scientific uncertainty, political pressures and public emotions while maintaining coherent messaging (Adebisi et al., 2021; Bonell et al., 2020).

Behavioral science frameworks have increasingly been used to understand adherence to public health measures during Covid-19. One of the most widely applied frameworks is the COM-B Model, which proposes that behavior results from the interaction of Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation (Michie et al., 2011; West et al., 2020) is a theoretical model to describe, predict, and ultimately enhance behaviour change. Capability refers to the individual's psychological and physical ability to engage in a behavior, including knowledge and skills. Opportunity refers to social and environmental factors that facilitate or hinder behavior. Motivation includes reflective and emotional processes influencing decision-making.

According to this model, successful implementation of preventive procedures depended not only on legislation but also on individuals having the ability, resources and willingness to adopt recommended behaviors (West et al., 2020).

The Health Beliefs Model (Rosenstock, 1974; Rosenstock et al., 1988) proposed that the adoption of disease prevention procedures is influenced by an individual's perception of the personal threat posed by the disease, together with beliefs regarding the effectiveness and benefits of the recommended preventive behaviors. These perceptions may predict the likelihood of adopting protective procedures such as face mask use during the Covid-19 pandemic (Bacon et al., 2021).

The use of face masks during Covid-19 illustrated the importance of integrating behavioral theories into public health communication (Kwon et al., 2021). Despite substantial scientific evidence supported mask use as an effective measure to reduce transmission, adherence varied across countries and populations (Feng et al., 2020; Henk, 2023, Royal, 2020). Several factors influenced compliance, including political polarization, misinformation, distrust in institutions, economic vulnerability, cultural norms, and conflicting media messages (Kim, 2023; Bonell et al., 2020). Studies conducted in North America, Europe, Asia, and Latin America demonstrated that consistent and transparent communication was associated with greater adherence to preventive procedures (WHO, 2012; Michie et al., 2020).

It is necessary to know population characteristics to select a model for communications of risks. Argentina as a South American country, presented a relevant context for examining pandemic risk communication. The country experienced prolonged lockdowns, economic instability, and important social inequalities (Rabinovich, 2021). According to the National Directorate of Epidemiology and Strategic Information, more than half of the population used to live in the region of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (Indec, 2021a), where viral transmission initially concentrated. During the first year of the pandemic, Argentina implemented one of the longest periods of mandatory

preventive social isolation in Latin America (Decree 297, 2020). Although these measures initially achieved broad public support, prolonged restrictions generated economic stress, emotional fatigue, and growing social tensions (Kalfas et al., 2024). Poverty rates increased significantly during the pandemic, and unemployment affected vulnerable populations disproportionately (Indec, 2021b).

The Argentine healthcare system also faced structural challenges. Access to healthcare and preventive resources differed substantially across regions. Furthermore, testing capacity remained limited compared with some high-income countries (Ramirez et al., 2022). These limitations may not have remained effective if mortality rates had increased substantially or if the healthcare system had collapsed. However, to date, it has not occurred in Argentina (ICL, 2022; Almeida 2020). The importance of non-pharmacological preventive procedures such as masking and distancing was crucial (WHO, 2021).

For these reasons, social distancing was critically important to avoid spreading the virus. Argentina developed a moderate mortality index per million of inhabitants, but infections went for a long period. The Minister of Health of the Nation strategy focused on preventing collapse of the Health system (ICL, 2022).

Despite these challenges, Argentina implemented large-scale communication campaigns regarding face-mask use. National authorities disseminated messages through television, social media platforms, press conferences, governmental decrees, and collaborations with scientific advisors. At the same time, contradictory behaviors by political figures, misinformation on social media, and inconsistent public adherence created additional communication difficulties. A very long lockdown affected the emotional state and lifestyle of the whole population, mainly children and parents, which were strongly related (Fasano et al, 2021). The general population adhered to the use of masks most of the time, in spite of conflicting governmental messages (Bacon et al., 2020; Centro de Información de Medicamentos, 2020)).

Evaluating how these communication strategies through a behavioral framework may provide insights into the strengths and limitations of governmental responses during public health crises.

Our objective was to identify and analyze the use of face masks and related preventive measures. Using the COM-B framework, we examined how communication efforts addressed public capability, opportunity and motivation for mask use during the first phases of the pandemic.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative content analysis design to examine governmental risk communication strategies related to face-mask use during the COVID-19 pandemic in Argentina. The analysis focused on the period

between March 2020 and March 2021, corresponding to the first major pandemic phases in the country and the period preceding large-scale vaccination campaigns.

The study was conducted within the framework of a major surveillance initiative, the International Covid-19 Awareness and Responses Evaluation Study (Bacon et al., 2020), investigating attitudes, concerns and behavioral responses related to Covid-19 public health measures.

Communication materials were collected from multiple official and public sources, and interactions through likes, shares and comments analysis. These including:

- Television broadcasts and news coverage interactions registered in social media YouTube Channel as local C5N, massive international as TyC Sports Channels.
- Official governmental websites as Ministry of Health, National Directorate of Epidemiology, Pink House from National Government.
- Social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.
- National governmental decrees related to preventive procedures and mask use.
- Press conferences from national and provincial authorities.
- Public educational campaigns and audiovisual materials from educational websites as University of Cordoba.
- Reports from international organizations such as WHO, Our World in Data and Unicef.
- Media reports regarding public compliance and contradictory public events from local newspapers like *Telam*, *Infobae*, *Clarín*, and *Chequeado*.

Behavioral responses on a population level around mask use were collected through written texts, videos, photographs, infographics, media statements, and social media campaigns. Communication outputs from the Ministry of Health and the Executive Branch were prioritized.

Data Collection Procedure

Each author independently reviewed collected communication materials corresponding to specific periods of the pandemic. Data extraction followed a structured process based on the temporal phases used within the iCARE framework. The research team conducted regular meetings to discuss interpretations, reconcile discrepancies, and organize findings according to the COM-B model.

A timeline was developed to correlate major governmental communication initiatives with relevant public health decrees and epidemiological phases.

Particular attention was given to the implementation of mandatory face mask policies and communication campaigns promoting preventive behaviors.

Analytical Framework

The COM-B model served as the theoretical basis for analysis, as part of the Behavioral Change Wheel BCW Model (Michie et al., 2011). Communication materials were classified according in the following dimensions:

- **Capability:** Human behavior (B) results from the interaction between personal physical and psychological capabilities (C). This includes messages that aim to improve knowledge, understanding, or skills regarding face mask use, hygiene procedures, and disease prevention.
- **Opportunity (O):** Includes environmental or social conditions facilitating adherence to preventive behaviors, including accessibility of information, public campaigns, leadership communication, and social norms.
- **Motivators (M):** Are messages and social dynamics influencing attitudes, beliefs, emotions, fears, risk perception, trust, and willingness to comply with preventive procedures. Motivation includes reflective thinking or automatic emotional-“thinking” with the heart (WHO, 2012).

The analysis also considered conflicting communication, contradictory political behavior and social responses documented through media reports and public surveys.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for the iCARE study has been obtained from the Comité d'éthique de recherche du CIUSSS-NIM (Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Nord-de-l'île-de-Montréal), approval #: 2020-2099 / 25-03-2020. The present study was also approved by the Ethics and Research Committee at University of Flores, approval 2021/ 19-12-2021, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To improve rigor, multiple investigators participated in data extraction and interpretation. Triangulation of data sources allowed comparison between governmental communication, media coverage, and public behavioral responses. Consensus meetings among researchers supported reliability and minimized interpretative bias.

3. Results

3. 1. Overview of the Communication Timeline

The timeline period was organized in relation to the quantitative iCare study. Argentina's communication strategy regarding face mask use evolved alongside with the progression of the pandemic, on two waves. From March 2020 into early 2021, communication focused on strict preventive measures, uncertainty regarding viral transmission, and the need to "flatten the curve" (Feng et al., 2020a).

During the second wave, communication emphasized vaccination and economic reopening (Duran et al., 2024).

Throughout this period, governmental authorities used mass communication channels intensively. Daily press conferences, national broadcasts, social media campaigns, and collaborations with scientific advisors were prominent components of public communication. Official Government Repositories webpage contains all campaigns (Agencia Nacional de Discapacidad, 2020b).

3. 2. Capability

3. 2. 1. Educational Communication and Public Knowledge

The capability dimension was strongly represented in governmental communication strategies. International authorities disseminated educational information explaining the importance of hand hygiene, physical distancing and mask use (WHO, 2020b; Feng et al., 2020b).

Following WHO recommendations, Argentina introduced mandatory face mask regulations in public transport services, outdoors and indoors on public buildings, to circulate in public or private transport, when there were two or more people, and to circulate and stay in public space, through National Decrees in April 2020. through the Official Gazzette (Gazzette) and local Decrees (República Argentina (2020b).

3. 2. 2. Government campaigns Decree 297 (2020)

Government campaigns instructed step-by-step procedures for mask use and hygiene. These materials promoted individual and collective responsibility and attempted to normalize preventive behaviors as part of daily routine, Local campaigns (Ciudad, Santa Cruz), newspapers webpages (*LaNacion.com*) and social media (Agencia Nacional de Discapacidad, 2020a).

A National Committee of Scientific Advisors included scientific advisors such as infectologists, epidemiologists and health professionals during TV and media transmission of information. Their participation aimed to increase the

credibility and scientific legitimacy of recommendations. Public conferences featuring health experts became highly visible during the first pandemic months (Casa Rosada, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

3. 2. 3. Mass Media Reach

The government utilized the Cadena Nacional (National Broadcast Network) and mandatory public service announcement slots, with short 30-to 60-second spots emphasizing technical instructions. The tone was highly prescriptive and authoritative in early 2020, transitioning into emotional storytelling and relief framing by mid-2021 to combat “pandemic fatigue”. These media campaigns achieved high engagement. Media posts regarding preventive procedures reached around 30000 views, comments and interactions in the three first months (Ministerio de Salud, Instagram, 2021). Messages also were disseminated through multiple formats, including infographics, television advertisements, online videos, and radio broadcasts. The Minister of Health of the Nation led a press conference which provided updates of the National epidemiological situation and issued recommendations for the end year gatherings and holiday travel. Four videos published on official government YouTube channels drew attention to the importance of maintaining preventive behaviors, particularly the continued use of face masks rather than engaging in social relaxation (República Argentina 2020a; Casa Rosada, 2021). These videos received substantial public engagement: the first accumulated approximately 50.000 views, likes, and comments; another, focused on how to use face masks during the summer, reached 14000 interactions, and a third explaining why mask use remained necessary in summer, reached 114.000 interactions.

According to Unicef reports, responses from the Argentine population indicated that 92 % of households, and 89 % of those in villages, and informal settlements, had access to masks and were aware of preventive measures. Adolescents demonstrated substantial knowledge regarding prevention strategies: 92 % mentioned hand washing; 72 % identified social distancing; 36 % reported avoiding touching their face, and 27 % referred to disinfecting household objects (Unicef, 2020).

Nevertheless, socioeconomic inequalities affected access to healthcare resources. Vulnerable populations, refugees and migrants faced additional barriers due to socioeconomic conditions and operational limitations prior to the pandemic. These inequalities may have reduced the effectiveness of universal communication strategies (Unicef, 2020).

3. 3. Contradictory Behaviors

Despite official recommendations, media coverage frequently highlighted inconsistent behavior among political leaders and public figures who failed to

use mandatory masks during meetings and public appearances. Such contradictions weakened the consistency of public messaging and created confusion regarding the seriousness of recommendations (Pope, Instagram, 2021 Non compliance to governmental norms in Campbell & Sheldon, 2021).

3. 4. Motivation Skills

3. 4. 1. Public Risk Perception

Motivational aspects evolved substantially throughout the pandemic. During the first months, fear and uncertainty promoted widespread adherence to preventive procedures. Public concern regarding infection risk contributed to high levels of compliance with mask use and social distancing. Surveys conducted during early pandemic phases indicated substantial public support for governmental restrictions in 79 % of the population expressing agreement. The most widely adopted measures were handwashing and use of alcohol-based sanitizers, where the least adopted were stockpiling goods due to perceived shortages and purchasing chinstraps. Despite this general support, 8 out of 10 respondents reported a low confidence in others' compliance to preventive procedures, while simultaneously expressing a strong personal commitment to protective behaviors (Cuadra-Martínez et al., 2020).

3. 4. 2. Behavioral Fatigue

As the pandemic continued, prolonged restrictions contributed to emotional exhaustion, economic stress, and reduced adherence. Public motivation declined as individuals faced financial insecurity, unemployment, and social isolation (Kalfas et al., 2024). It is worth noting the survey conducted by D'Alessio and Berensztejn based on 700 cases, which found that respondents generally agreed with the measures adopted by the Government, although they questioned delays in decision-making (Paladini, 2020). Younger populations were particularly associated with denial attitudes, organizing social gatherings and reduced compliance with preventive behaviors (Pizzi, 2020; Grupo la Provincia, 2020; C5N, 2021). Cerezo Prieto (2020) emphasized that, for preventive procedures to be more effective, authorities should avoid relying solely on policing strategies and instead tailor message content to the characteristics of the target audience.

3. 4. 3. Humor and Emotional Communication

Some campaigns incorporated humor and emotional identification to increase engagement, particularly among younger audiences. Summer campaigns promoted continued preventive behaviors, while encouraging

tourism and economic reopening. These campaigns attempted to balance public health concerns with social and economic pressures (Casa Rosada, 2021).

3. 5. Cognitive Biases and Misinformation

The circulation of misinformation on social media influenced public perceptions and attitudes. Conflicting information regarding the severity of Covid-19 and the effectiveness of preventive measures contributed to uncertainty. Unicef survey also revealed cognitive biases influencing young people's decision-making, including optimistic self-perception (Unicef, 2020).

Government communication attempted to counter misinformation through official channels and expert participation. However, contradictory political events undermined some public health messages.

Examples included mass gatherings related to the public funeral of Maradona, a popular soccer player (TyC Sports, 2020), and political demonstrations like the abortion law (Telam, 2020), where social distancing and mask use were inconsistently observed.

Other meetings held by the Government leaders and Union workers refused to use face masks (Chequeado, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

3. 6. Opportunity

3. 6. 1. Mass Communication Infrastructure

The opportunity dimension was reflected in the extensive use of mass media and coordinated communication strategies. Argentina's media-centered political culture facilitated dissemination of governmental messages through television, national broadcasts, and digital platforms.

Slimovich (2021) observed that Argentine society can be described as "media -like", in which television, the print press, radio and cinema function as central instruments of political representation. In this context, risk communication during the pandemic in Argentina, was constructed as a media event, largely through nationally broadcast, with high social impact. The real-time communications accompanied the launch of each stage implemented throughout 2020. During the initial phase, the presence of the other district leaders reinforced the President's message, emphasizing the mandatory quarantine and the need to follow all recommendations issued at the Interministerial meeting for coronavirus (Press conference, 2020; Official Gazette, 2020). Compliance from local population did not have great counterproductive behaviors, described as the Peltzman effect (Peltzman, 1975), like German population, who engaged in risk compensatory behavior (fewer safety behaviors) after regulations were introduced and obligated by the government (Henk et al., 2023).

Within this media framework, leadership appeared shared among the President, governors, and mayors, alongside the strategic use of experts to generate confidence and justify the extension of preventive measures during the first part of 2020, “Seguir cuidandose”.

National and provincial authorities frequently appeared together during press conferences, presenting a coordinated public image during early pandemic phases. Shared leadership between political authorities and scientific advisors contributed to perceived legitimacy and coherence.

3. 6. 2. Environmental and Social Conditions

Governmental communication adapted to epidemiological conditions and regional realities. Different provinces implemented varying levels of restrictions according to local infection rates and healthcare capacity.

Mandatory mask regulations created environmental conditions supporting adherence. Public transportation systems, indoor spaces, and many outdoor settings required mask use by decree (Decree 334).

However, opportunity structures were negatively affected by socioeconomic conditions. Economic vulnerability limited the feasibility of prolonged confinement for many individuals who needed to continue working. Crowded living conditions in some urban settlements also complicated social distancing practices (Bacon et al., 2021).

3. 6. 3. Communication Fatigue and Declining Trust

Overtime, the effectiveness of communication campaigns appeared to decrease. Contradictory actions by political leaders, prolonged restrictions, and inconsistent enforcement weakened public trust. By late 2020 and early 2021, social fatigue reduced adherence to preventive procedures despite continued governmental messaging (Kalfas et al., 2024).

Public discourse increasingly shifted toward economic reopening, vacations, and normalization of activities. This transition may have contributed to reduced perception of risk and relaxation of preventive behaviors (Zu, 2021).

4. Discussion

This study analyzed Argentine governmental communication strategies regarding face-mask use during the Covid-19 pandemic using the COM-B behavioral framework. The findings demonstrate that Argentina implemented extensive and multifaceted communication efforts promoting mask use and preventive behaviors during the first year of the pandemic. Educational campaigns, scientific participation, mass media dissemination, and legislative

measures contributed to high public awareness regarding preventive procedures. However, inconsistencies between official recommendations and the behavior of public authorities, combined with socioeconomic challenges and prolonged restrictions, limited the long-term effectiveness of communication strategies (Ben Zacharia et al., 2026).

The capability dimension was strongly represented in governmental interventions. Public communication campaigns provided practical information regarding mask use, hand hygiene, and social distancing. The inclusion of audiovisual materials and expert participation likely facilitated understanding of preventive recommendations. These findings are consistent with international evidence demonstrating that educational communication increases adherence to preventive health behaviors during infectious disease outbreaks (Enticott et al., 2021). Cross-sectional partnership was beneficial because although scientific, academic and political experts can design solutions for marginalized populations, structural change requires leaders who understand daily challenges and are willing to engage the community in mobilisation and action to change practices and policies (Rios et al., 2021).

The rapid implementation of mandatory masking policies may also have contributed to normalization of preventive behaviors. Previous studies have shown that clear regulations combined with public education improve adherence to non-pharmacological interventions (Abboah-Offei & Salifu, 2021). In Argentina, the widespread dissemination of practical instructions regarding homemade masks was particularly relevant during early pandemic phases, when commercial supplies were limited globally (Romo & Ojeda-Galaviz, 2021).

Nevertheless, the study also identified structural inequalities affecting public capability. Vulnerable populations, including low-income communities and migrants, experienced barriers to healthcare access and preventive resources. Public communication strategies may therefore have reached populations unevenly. This observation highlights the importance of adapting health communication to social determinants of health and ensuring accessibility for marginalized groups. Strategic partnerships with organisations that serve vulnerable populations can enhance the reach and influence of risk communications (Wieland, 2020).

The present findings also emphasize the importance of trust and coherence in public communication. Contradictory behaviors among political leaders undermined the consistency of governmental messages. Public appearances without masks, crowded political events, and inconsistent adherence among authorities may have weakened perceived legitimacy of recommendations. Behavioral science literature suggests that visible modeling by leaders strongly influences public adherence to preventive behaviors (Kalfas et al., 2024). When authorities fail to follow their own recommendations, public trust may decline significantly.

The role of misinformation and social media also emerged as an important challenge. During periods of uncertainty, populations are particularly vulnerable to conflicting information, rumors, and cognitive

biases. Although official communication attempted to counter misinformation through expert participation and institutional messaging (Press conference, Kim), competing narratives continued circulating widely. Younger populations appeared especially vulnerable to minimization of risk and relaxation of preventive behaviors.

The opportunity dimension demonstrated both strengths and limitations of the Argentine response. On one hand, the country implemented extensive mass communication campaigns using television, social media, press conferences, and coordinated governmental appearances. The use of experts alongside political authorities likely enhanced early credibility. Campaigns from Universities reached local communities (Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Universidad Nacional de Cuyo). However, social media also has the potential to increase health inequities among subpopulations at the highest risk for experiencing healthcare inequities due to lower digital access and literacy or differences in culture norms and preferences (Peter et al., 2024).

On the other hand, opportunity structures were constrained by socioeconomic realities. Individuals experiencing economic insecurity often lacked the practical possibility of maintaining prolonged confinement measures (Bacon, 2021).

Contradictory attitudes from social representatives, raising rates of poverty, the need to go back to work and school, and a low rate of vaccination contributed to morbidity and mortality, but the health system never collapsed (ICL, 2022).

Motivational factors evolved considerably during the pandemic. During initial phases, fear of infection and uncertainty generated high adherence to preventive procedures. Similar findings have been reported internationally, where perceived threat and risk awareness were associated with increased compliance with public health recommendations (Bacon et al., 2021). A content analysis of narrative answers in a study of compliance/noncompliance agreed with local population behaviors (Ben Zacharia et al., 2026). Another qualitative research reported high compliance with face covering recommendations in an American sample. The most prevalent motivation for the use of face coverings was to protect or respect other people, including high-risk populations and individuals. Other motivators were self-protection, responsibility, desire for control, requirements, and expert advice, but the same sample reported that they often did not wear them around family, friends, and colleagues (Shelus et al., 2020). We found that the majority of individuals intended to comply with preventative procedures, with primary reasons as social responsibility, self-protection, and protection of family members. Reasons identified for not complying were viewing preventative practices as unnecessary, getting mixed messages from various sources about effectiveness, distrust in government and inability to comply (Wang et al., 2021).

Overtime, however, emotional exhaustion and economic hardship reduced motivation (Farrell et al., 2021). Argentina experienced prolonged restrictions, increasing poverty rates, and social fatigue during 2020 and 2021

(Kalfas et al., 2024). Under these conditions, maintaining adherence to preventive behaviors became progressively more difficult. Behavioral fatigue has been widely discussed in pandemic literature and may partially explain declining compliance with masking and distancing recommendations over time (Bacon et al., 2021). Local surveys showed a clear tendency of compliance with mask use, despite the conflicting information held by authorities. A long curve of high rate of infections was developed during winter and springtime on 2020th and autumn- winter 2021st. (Our World in Data, 2020).

This study reports face mask-use communication strategies in a Latin American population, showing results similar to those observed in other populations such as the Netherlands; however, no previous data from any other Latin American sample have been documented for face mask-use (Wismans et al., 2022), mostly all studies are about communication for vaccine adherence (Avila et al., 2026).

Supports previous international findings indicating that communication alone is insufficient to sustain long-term behavioral change during pandemics. Effective communication must be accompanied by structural support, social protection policies, and coherent leadership behavior. Public health messaging should also evolve dynamically in response to changing emotional and socioeconomic contexts (Michie et al., 2011).

An important strength of the study is the use of the COM-B framework to analyze communication strategies systematically. The framework facilitated examination of behavioral determinants beyond simple message dissemination. By integrating capability, motivation, and opportunity, the analysis provides a multidimensional understanding of public adherence during health emergencies (Michie et al., 2011).

The study also has limitations. First, the analysis relied primarily on publicly available communication materials and media reports but direct interviews with citizens were lower than samples from other countries. Second, the study did not quantitatively measure behavioral adherence or effectiveness of specific campaigns, only through interactions within social media campaigns. Third, social media engagement indicators such as views and likes may not accurately reflect behavioral change. Fourth, there were not examples if health organisations capitalised on already established communication mediums and leaders commonly used by the target population, like adolescents (Hilliard, 2021), as all analysed campaigns were massively targeted. Finally, the Argentine context may differ from other countries regarding political culture, socioeconomic conditions, and media dynamics, limiting generalizability.

Future research should investigate the impact of communication strategies among vulnerable populations and evaluate how socioeconomic inequalities influence adherence to preventive procedures. Identification of cultural nuances, values and specific needs of diverse populations is presented as providing a foundation for more inclusive and impactful communication strategies tailored to different communities (Peter et al., 2024). Comparative studies across Latin American countries may also improve

understanding of effective communication practices during public health crises.

The findings nevertheless provide important implications for future emergency preparedness. Communication strategies should prioritize transparency, consistency, and adaptation to changing social contexts. Scientific advisors and political authorities should model preventive behaviors consistently. Public health communication should also address emotional fatigue, misinformation, and structural barriers affecting vulnerable populations (Kalfas et al., 2024; Peter et al., 2024).

Ultimately, effective pandemic communication requires integration of behavioral science, public trust, and social support policies. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that adherence to preventive procedures depends not only on information availability but also on the broader social, political, and economic environment in which communication occurs.

5. Conclusion

There were reliable resources about risk communication strategies for wearing masks implemented by governments and health-related organizations. Strategies to educate and inform the population included decrees and media information to improve capabilities without clear health communication models. There was motivation in the population who took chances of the opportunities provided, despite inconsistent behavior from the authorities.

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