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Media coverage of double masking during the COVID-19 pandemic: A lesson plan

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Abstract:

BACKGROUND: Media news emerged reporting that double masking can increase protection against COVID-19. This led to differential published reports, fueling debate among the public and creating controversy and confusion. In this paper, we present a lesson plan for health communication students to enhance their critical thinking ability and equip them with the necessary tools to analyze various media texts and products.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: The lesson plan included a set of activities on three different news pieces related to double masking, each published through a different media outlet: A newspaper, a television channel, and an online magazine/podcast. The lesson was designed for 120 min, over 2 days. It required a digital device and Internet access. Students were tasked to compare between the news based on set criteria and asked to provide their opinions accordingly. They were also assigned to fill out an inverted pyramid for further analysis and interpretation.

RESULTS: Students were assessed through a rubric that evaluated gained competencies after lesson completion. The rubric is composed of five elements to assess the students' performances. Elements included filling assigned cells and diagrams, usage of proper English, validation of news sources and reported facts, critical analysis of findings, and finishing the lesson on time.

CONCLUSION: This lesson plan enhanced the ability of students to understand and analyze various media texts and validate the content and perspectives published through the different platforms.

Keywords:

COVID-19, critical thinking, lesson plan, misinformation

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the surge of misinformation and rumors, especially with the lack of proper health communication strategies to disseminate scientific output.^[1,2] Wearing "double masks" has been one of the debatable topics worldwide, especially in the United States. The controversy started in October 2020, after a photograph was released of Joe Biden, the president of the United States, arriving at a town hall wearing double masks.^[3] Opinions diverged on whether it is better to wear one mask or two. As

a result, this news event was covered differently on various media platforms, which created a public debate among physicians, experts, journalists, and the public. Health communication university students partook in this debate, as they tried to reflect critically on what news they should believe.

Lesson plans are created and developed by teachers to guide, control, and lead their classes.^[4] It is used for different educational stages, starting from elementary all the way to university levels. The coverage of "double masking" differed from one media platform to another. To explore and analyze these variations, we chose three different

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news pieces, each published through a different media outlet: A newspaper, a television channel, and an online magazine/podcast. The double masking issue was presented from different angles, offering different perspectives on how people perceived this practice. Exploring these variations through a systematically designed lesson plan will enhance the ability of students to understand and analyze various media texts and equip them with the necessary tools to achieve digital and media literacy.^[5]

TV Channel: “ABC7 News”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cn3-VRacS2Y&list=PL4081849486385674>

The ABC7 News channel host interviewed Jeremy Harold, the co-founder of “#Masks4all,” an organization that supports the need to wear masks in public to slow COVID-19. When asked about double masking, Harold said *I am not sure what we can assume anymore*. He argued that we are still in the phase where we do not have

enough data about the variants or whether double masking will create double protection or not. He also expressed his concerns about double masking, saying that it will make it hard to breathe.^[6]

Newspaper: “The Guardian”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/10/mask-guidance-cdc-two-masks-close-fitting>.

The Guardian Newspaper published an article titled “CDC study recommends double masking to reduce COVID-19 exposure.” The author of the article, Jessica Glenza, explained the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)’s recent study on the effectiveness of double-masking in protecting people from getting infected and spreading the virus.^[7]

Online magazine: “Slate”

<https://slate.com/technology/2021/02/double-masking-may-be-needed-but-it-sucks.html?via=rss>.

Slate published an article titled “Honestly, Double Masking Sucks,” which criticized the CDC guidelines. The author, Shannon Palus, expressed her unwillingness to wear double masks, as she believed that double masks are getting attention just because of the dramatic nature of the issue. Instead of double masking, Palus suggested other ways to protect people from the virus, such as getting fitter masks.^[8]

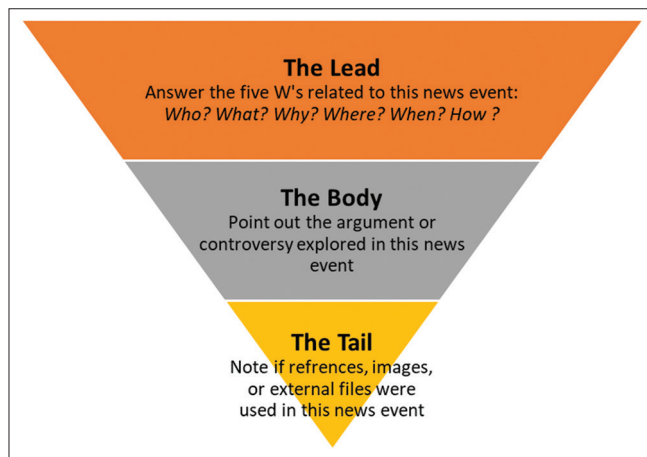


Figure 1: Inverted pyramid questions classified into three parts: Lead, body, and tail

Materials and Methods

Objectives and goals

- Objective 1: To describe and compare “double masking” coverage between the three different media portals (TV channel, newspaper, online magazine).

Table 1: Comparison of elements between three different media platforms ABC7 news, the guardian, and slate

Elements	ABC7 news	The guardian	Slate
Target audience (physicians, students, journalists, public...)			
Design (simple vs. complex layout)			
Article/video length (short vs. long)			
Language (formal vs. informal)			
Voice (first vs. second vs. third)			
Emotions (included or not)			
Pricing (open access vs. subscription)			

Table 2: Rubric for evaluating the competencies gained by students after completing the lesson plan

	Task not completed	Incomplete task	Complete task
Filled all the table cells and activities	0	1	2
Used proper language to express ideas and rationale	0	1	2
Demonstrated adequate judgment to assess the validity of the news pieces	0	1	2
Showed an insightful thought process and critical analysis abilities	0	1	2
Completed the task on time	0	1	2

- Objective 2: To critically analyze and validate the content and perspectives published through the different platforms.

Target audience

The target audience of this lesson plan is 1st-year university students majoring in health communication. Nevertheless, this lesson plan is a good practice for all media and health-related specialists and/or academics.

Duration

This activity's duration is 120 min, over 2 days. As a homework, the students will be asked to watch/read the material on the 1st day (30 min). Next day, the students will be divided in the class in groups of three to complete the activities (90 min). A 10-minute break can be given after one full hour had passed.

Required resources

To complete this lesson, students will need:

- Digital device (computer, laptop, tablet... etc.) to complete the activities
- Internet access to view the material
- Pen and paper to take notes (optional).

Specific activities

Two activities will be assigned to students:

Activity for objective 1

Students will be asked to fill the following comparative table [Table 1] and answer the following question:

- After filling the table, in your opinion, which of the described media was the best portal to cover the issue of double masking? Why?

Activity for objective 2

Students are asked to fill out the inverted pyramid [Figure 1] for each of the news given, and then answer the following two questions:

- Were the arguments in the different portals supported by credible sources and/or evidence-based science?
- Based on your analysis, which of the three media presented correct and evidence-based information?

Assessment and Results

A rubric was created to evaluate the gained student competencies after completing the lesson plan [Table 2]. The rubric is composed of five elements to assess the students' performances. Elements included (1) filling assigned cells and diagrams; (2) usage of proper English language skills; (3) validation of news sources and reported facts; (4) critical analysis of findings; and (5) finishing the lesson on time. A total score over ten is finally calculated.

Discussion

"Double masking" was chosen as the topic of this lesson because the subject created a lot of controversy and is very relevant, as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. The issue at hand widened a rift in opinions on mask mandates and led to the circulation of misinformation among the public. Despite the protective role of face masks, many complained of the difficulty in breathing while double masking, and the muffling of sounds, which hinders interpersonal communication.^[9]

Health communication is a novel field that aims to raise awareness on health related topics and improve health outcomes by using behavioral and social models.^[10] As future health communication specialists, students need to be aware of the up-to-date guidelines regarding facemasks and must possess the skills to analyze critically health-related news found on various platforms. This exercise will further help students adopt authentic and evidence-based science, as they write, promote, and/or share health-related news, thus, influencing the public positively to help mitigate the effects of the current pandemic.

The widespread diffusion of social networks publicized the collection, creation, and distribution of knowledge. Today, professional journalists and media outlets are not exclusively the source of information.^[11,12] As such, building adequate health communication practices is important to ensure that correct information is being disseminated publicly. The lesson plan will also offer the students the opportunity to reflect on the important role that media play in their lives.^[13] It will further enhance their analysis and evaluation competencies, as it will stimulate them to ask good questions, gain knowledge, and contextualize findings to derive correct and evidence-based conclusions.^[5]

Conclusion

Lesson plans are vital to improve the analytical and critical thinking of students. Activities with designed frameworks help guide students to follow the academic ladder to gather the correct information. Following these activities with open-ended questions stimulates the students' critical thinking and analytical skills. This lesson plan aimed to help students filter evidence-based science from opinions and rumors. This is important to improve our digital health literacy, as we continue to navigate the current COVID-19 pandemic.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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