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**Was Wearing a Facemask a Form of Cultural Resistance or
a Crisis Communication Challenge? Retrospections on
Vrede Community Experiences**

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AKPAN, Udoh James, Ph.D., CPRP

(Main and Corresponding Author)

Department of Criminology and Forensic Studies,

School of Applied Human Sciences,

College of Humanities,

University of KwaZulu-Natal,

Durban, South Africa

Email – udohja2000@yahoo.com

MKHIZE, Sazelo Michael, Ph.D.

Department of Criminology and Forensic Studies,

School of Applied Human Sciences,

College of Humanities,

University of KwaZulu-Natal,

Durban, South Africa

&

PATRICK Hosea Olayiwola, Ph.D.

(Global Migration and Community Development),

School of Built Environment & Development Studies,

College of Humanities,

University of KwaZulu-Natal,

South Africa

Abstract

It has been three years since the World Health Organisation (WHO) raised the warning level for COVID-19 and declared it a global public health emergency. Since then, the virus has killed approximately seven million people. However, some experts believe that this data is an underestimation. The WHO's declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic in 2020 caught everyone off guard, but it was necessary for the global health watchdog to do so that it could be addressed as an emergency. Wearing a facemask was one of the ways public health planners and virologists in many countries thought of stopping the virus's spread before the development of a vaccine. The public, including some conservative politicians in the world, received it with mixed feelings, and some outright rejected it. The apathy towards wearing facemasks also reverberated in South Africa. This study explores this apathy with a view to appreciating the attitudes of the people and why they think wearing a mask is awkward for their culture. Using a qualitative and structured interview research approach, the study interviewed male and female participants in the Vrede community in Freestate Province, and concluded that some of the apathy was based on misunderstandings because the messaging from the government on wearing a facemask and COVID-19 did not quite address their cultural biases and attitudinal dispositions and was not firm on enforcement. The study concludes that the government had to have approached the advocacy for wearing facemasks from an inclusive stakeholder management and crisis communication perspective.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Facemask, Culture, Stakeholder Management, Crisis Communication,*

Introduction

One of the phenomena that confronted the government, health workers, and scholars alike was the apathy of citizens and residents towards wearing facemasks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ordinarily, these officials and scholars may have imagined that people would accept all cautionary information disseminated to them and comply with it. The government, especially their communication and mobilisation units, did not envisage that culture could have consideration over health and safety.

This realisation brought some apprehension to the government and thus jolted them into panic mode that other measures to force compliance were contemplated by various governments. It is to this end that this paper intends to interrogate the issues and review the behaviour of the people as against government directives. Also, this study reviews government communication strategies to appreciate the gaps and failure to understand the cultural dynamics of the people before developing an effective crisis communication strategy.

It has been three years since the WHO declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern, reaching its highest level of

alarm, as reported by¹Euronews online in February 2023. Since then, the virus has claimed close to seven million lives, of which two million are in Europe alone. But some experts say this data is an underestimation. The declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic by the WHO in 2020 certainly jolted an unsuspecting world, and various governments in search of a solution, at least to prevent the spread, adopted many measures, which included travel bans, social distancing, basic hygiene like hand washing, and also proposed the wearing of a facemask as a means of stopping the spread of the virus. In continuation of the search to halt its spread through facemasks, the WHO (2021)² indicated that using a mask should be part of an all-encompassing plan of action to stop the spread of disease and save lives. To this end, WHO (2021) listed the proper ways to use a facemask, including washing your hands before putting one on, as well as before and after taking it off and after touching it at any time; making sure the mask covers your nose, mouth, and chin; when you take off a mask, storing it in a clean plastic bag; daily either washing it if it's a fabric mask or throwing a medical mask in the trash; and not using masks with valves. Though WHO (2021) warned that the use of a facemask alone is not satisfactorily adequate to afford an adequate level of protection against COVID-19, it would act as a preventive measure and, by doing so, slow down the spread. To this end, respective governments, including South Africa, have begun a campaign to inform their citizens that if COVID-19 is spreading in your local area, stay safe by taking some simple safeguards, such as physical distance, wearing a mask, keeping rooms well ventilated, avoiding crowds, cleaning your hands, and coughing into a bent elbow or tissue. Where you live and work, check the local advice. Making masks a commonplace aspect of social interaction is the message's main focus. Masks must be used, stored, cleaned, and discarded properly to be as effective as possible. However, the message seemed not to have reverberated with people, especially in Vrede Town, a community in Free State Province.

Crises Communication

Alpaslan and Mitroff (2009) argue that in the context of crises, adopting the principles of a stakeholder model is important as it will help to identify and then rank the various stakeholders in a community. In the case of the Vrede community, the stakeholders are the municipality that runs the local

¹ <https://www.euronews.com/2023/01/30/world-marks-the-third-anniversary-of-the-start-of-the-covid-19-pandemic> - Accessed on 11th February, 2023

² <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks> - Accessed 22, June 2022

administration, the government of Free State, and the residents. In other words, Vrede has a political and administrative authority in place that will continually interface with the provincial and central governments in Bloemfontein and Pretoria, respectively. Therefore, in the event of a crisis, there could be some gaps in the communication flow since synergy may not be well harnessed.

In order to effectively manage and communicate a crisis, a decision-maker must comprehend its causes, nature, and impact on stakeholders' perspectives, as in the instance of COVID-19, according to Björck (2016). For crisis avoidance, identifying an organisation's vulnerabilities is crucial, but practitioners frequently struggle to characterise crisis scenarios, especially the worst-case ones. In other words, a crisis or crises are inevitable in a community, and there is a need for the leadership of the community to respond in such a manner to ameliorate the effect on the community dwellers. However, the leader must understand and appreciate the crisis.

It is therefore necessary to appreciate what a crisis is. Ndlela (2018), in his Crisis Communication work, said that crises are an inevitable part of modern society with ramifications not only for organisations but also for diverse stakeholders that constitute part of an organisation's environment. According to Argenti (2013), a crisis is any event or period that will or might lead to an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group, or all of society. Crises are negative changes in human affairs, especially when they occur abruptly with little or no warning, akin to COVID-19. A crisis is also a testing time for an emergency. Another way of looking at a crisis is that it is a major catastrophe that may occur either naturally or due to human error, intervention, or malicious intent. It can result in tangible or intangible losses. According to Coombs (2007), a crisis is any sudden and unexpected event that curtails a community or an organisation's ability to be involved in everyday operations and can cause tangible and intangible losses.

Managing health communication in any country is usually in the purview of the government at all levels since they are elected or appointed to manage people. In the findings of the works of Sanjeev, Pande, and Santhosh Kumar (2021), the government's role in managing the first wave of crises via efficient crisis communication Pandemic of COVID-19: According to a study on the success of the Keralan government, for the government to be successful in communicating during crises, it must ensure proper information management, media management, appropriate supportive action, and direct communication with stakeholders who are citizens, as well as the varied demography in a country. Additionally, good

communication will aid the government in gaining favourable constituent attribution, favourable framing, favourable affect from stakeholders, and active stakeholder participation in the crisis management process, all of which will lead to successful crisis management and an improved reputation for the government.

In his work on communicating and managing crises in the world of politics, Houlberg- Salomonsen (2020) highlights that crisis communication and the world of politics and public administration enrich each other by sharing their conceptual context of crisis management. He insists that the interface of politics and public administration will not only create an atmosphere for a proper response to crisis management, but it will also reduce the element of politics. This is so because crises that bedevil a country are mostly managed by public administrators, who are often affiliated with or deployed by political organisations.

Crisis communication therefore refers to the dissemination of information by a government or political authority in this context to address a crisis that impacts the citizens' health and/or the government's reputation. The idea is that a government's reputation is perceived by everyone within and without the country, whether you manage your reputation or not. Effective crisis communication is essential for crisis management success. Information is needed during a crisis, and efficient communication gathers, analyses, and transmits pertinent information to interested parties (Coombs, 2010). The goals of crisis communication vary depending on the severity of the crisis. Crisis managers should be able to adapt as the crisis stage changes to meet the stakeholders' changing information needs.

According to FSC Interactive, published on December 12, 2014, in News & Trends online Magazine³, there are four phases to crisis communications: Readiness, Response, Reassurance, and Recovery.

Readiness

The first step in handling a crisis is understanding the threats that currently exist. Threats to one community are different from threats to another community. This step stresses the importance of not only recognising but also anticipating and understanding potential threats. While COVID-19 was a global threat, the way various communities in South Africa, and indeed, Free State Province responded to it was not uniform because of

³ <https://fscinteractive.com/blog/crisis-communication-four-phases-managing-crisis-social-media/#:~:text=According%20to%20Fathi%20there%20are,Response%2C%20Reassurance%2C%20and%20Recovery.> – Accessed on the 8th February 2023

the demographic, psychographic composition, and ecological differences in the community and with the people. It would therefore be an error for the government to approach their crisis communication approach from a generic point of planning and dissemination (FSC Interactive, 2014)

Once you have established your understanding of the nuances of your community, you will be able to appreciate the potential threats that might act as a barrier to effective communication. Then you can plan your crisis scenarios and the steps you would map out to eliminate the threats, and thus develop a process and plan of action for effective dissemination (FSC Interactive, 2014).

Response

There is a need to appreciate the importance of a quick, swift, and accurate response to a crisis to avoid chaos. It is important when responding to a situation, regardless of scale, that the information provided is accurate. There are various media platforms to mobilise in disseminating crisis communication. With social media, there are opportunities to address something immediately without disclosing information if all of the details have not been sorted out. Speed is not the only step to crafting an appropriate response. According to FSC Interactive (2014), when the government is preparing a response, consideration of the following must be adhered to: not waiting for the crisis to blow away; acknowledging the situation and not communicating in a vague way; acknowledging the impact it would have on the people; committing to continually researching crises with a view to providing solution(s); being transparent and keeping the people informed; sharing your corrective and action plan; and responding in the format in which the crisis was received.

Reassurance

Once there is a response to a crisis, the people must be reassured that the issues are being managed so that you can continue to maintain their support and their trust. Words and ameliorative action should be mobilised simultaneously to make the community stay intact without resorting to self-help because of their cultural beliefs, which are in conflict with the treatment of COVID-19, and to sustain their intactness (FSC Interactive, 2014).

Recovery

The fourth and final phase of crisis management is recovery. Most of the time, situations and crises reduce in intensity as time progresses. There is short-term recovery, which includes the immediate response and action following a crisis, and there is long-term recovery, which is the plan of the health planners to change their pre-COVID-19 attitudes, adapt to be better based on the information being made available by WHO and experience the health planners, health communicators, and governments have gathered, and put in place a mitigation plan for future re-occurrences (FSC Interactive, 2014)

The “worth” of Facemasks to Different People in Different Cultures

In February 2022, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) published a technical report⁴ titled “*Considerations for the use of face masks in the community in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant of concern*”. The goal of the paper was to analyse the effectiveness of utilising face masks in the community in preventing the spread of COVID-19 and to update and enhance the ECDC technical study on the topic. The review's primary audience was the public health authorities in the member states of the European Union and the European Economic Area (EU/EEA). Its objective was to determine whether the scientific evidence base had changed since December 2020 and whether any changes were justified in light of recent discoveries regarding variants of concern (VOCs), particularly the Omicron VOC. The report concurred that using the facemask in public was justified from a scientific and medical standpoint.

The Vrede community, or at least the majority of them, seemed not to be abreast of the efficacy as expounded by the technical report of the ECDC. To this end, they could not be bothered with reports, no matter how efficacious, on a subject that is not only alien to them but in a faraway country and also academic. Therefore, it would not suit the kind of information that will interest people in a peri-urban setting if it is not properly decoded, digested, and then presented in a manner that will interest them.

⁴ file:///C:/Users/ADMIN/Desktop/Post%20Doc%20UKZN/Research%20-%20Vrede/Vrede%20-%20Is%20wearing%20a%20facemask%20awkward/Considerations-for-use-of-face-masks-in-the-community-in-the-context-of-the-SARS-CoV-2-Omicron-variant-of-concern.pdf - Accessed February 6, 2023

In Roger (2020)'s study titled *"To wear or not to wear? Factors influencing wearing face masks in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic"*, he argued that young people tend to be more sensitive to the perceived judgment of others; to that extent, mobilising popular role models to wear masks might help, and the fact that for young people and also for women, self-protection is also important. He observed, however, that while stressing these factors may enhance compliance, there was a need to make people wear masks by law enforcement. However, he noted that if the law is too strict and requires people to wear it in the street, it would not lead to high compliance rates. However, this proposition may be restricted to climes with high education and a history of compliance with government programmes, and not necessarily areas that are grappling with other issues, including subsistence living.

In another study by Johansson, Sohlberg, Esaiasson, and Ghersetti (2021) titled *"Why Swedes Don't Wear Face Masks during the Pandemic: A Consequence of Blindly Trusting the Government"*, they observed that a decrease in trust in government affected the behaviour of citizens who did not respond to the communication of wearing facemasks.

In another study titled *"Does Karen wear a mask? The gendering of COVID-19 masking rhetoric"* by Bhasin, Butcher, Gordon, Hallward, and LeFebvre (2020), they sought to know how values and beliefs around gender influence social norms regarding masking. The paper therefore explored how the gendered meme "Karen" fits into social media discussions on support for and opposition to the wearing of masks to fight the spread of COVID-19. They found out that "Karen" is construed in highly gendered terms, regardless of whether she wears a mask. Those opposing masks are more likely to discuss Karen and do so using hyper-masculine language that praises men like President Donald Trump for being strong and fearless in their refusal to wear a mask. Jones (2021) agrees with Bhasin *et al.* (2020) that President Donald Trump had also made wearing a face mask a gendered issues because when he appeared wearing a mask for the first time and as a Republican congressional candidate, he tweeted "... I don't wear face masks, but POTUS is the only man who can pull it off and still look intensely masculine." Neville-Shepard (2021) corroborated this by stating that President Trump rhetoric suggested that masks threatened masculinity and functioned as a form of anti-choice bodily oppression. In Africa and indeed Vrede, the gendered argument may be true, but it is in isolated cases and very few. The people are more concerned about the cultural dimension other than gendered postulations.

Jones (2021) in his work *"The veil of civilisation and the semiotics of the mask"* argues that different cultures and civilisation seemed to have allowed their

anthropological and ethnographic dispositions and colouring to affect the conversation of around how facemask can protect people and who is being protected against viruses like COVID-19. He argued that the striking thing about the European and American guidelines that were in place before the recent ones about facemask is the degree to which they focused on the wearer of the mask as the one who is (or is not) protected. He gave examples of three different countries.

In the United States of America (USA), the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) do not recommend that people who are well wearing a face mask (including respirators) protect themselves from respiratory diseases, including COVID-19. In the United Kingdom (UK), face masks play a very important role in places such as hospitals, but there is very little evidence of widespread benefit for members of the public. Meanwhile, in Germany, there is not enough evidence to prove that wearing a surgical mask significantly reduces a healthy person's risk of becoming infected while wearing it. However, the advice from the three western countries contrasts with the advice of the Hong Kong Department of Health, which states that surgical masks can prevent the transmission of respiratory viruses from people who are ill. It is essential for people who are symptomatic (even if they have mild symptoms) to wear a surgical mask.

In Asia, wearing masks has always been a matter of protecting other people. Primary school students in places like China and Japan are taught to wear masks when they have a cold, and in times of epidemics, masks serve as a visible reminder that limiting infection is everyone's civic responsibility. However, in an article Bloomberg online magazine by Michelle Fay Cortez on February 6, 2023⁵ titled *Face Masks' Ability to Stop Viruses Needs Study*, Review Finds that there is currently no conclusive evidence on how much or whether wearing masks reduces the transmission of respiratory viruses, it stated, more than three years after Covid-19 appeared and despite influenza outbreaks that kill thousands of people every year.

The article quoted the work of Jefferson, Del Mar, Dooley, Ferroni, Al-Ansary, Bawazeer, Van Driel, Jones, Thorning, Beller, and Clark (2023), titled *Physical interventions to interrupt or reduce the spread of respiratory viruses*. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2023*. The survey for the report was undertaken by five hundred thousand people across the world by over 12 experts who reviewed 78 studies to figure out if physical interventions can

⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2023-02-06/face-masks-ability-to-stop-viruses-needs-study-review-finds> - Accessed 6th February 2023

help control these highly contagious pathogens. The initial conclusion for masks is that they do not prevent so much, and it is stated that wearing a medical or surgical mask probably makes little or no difference to infections from viruses like influenza or COVID-19.

This report is in contradiction with the technical report from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) in February 2022, which concluded that there was justification for a facemask to be worn as it acts as a prevention measure for to viruses, including COVID-19. However, Balkaran and Lukman (2021) report that in their findings across four provinces in South Africa, there was a near consensus, and it can therefore be inferred that the majority of the citizens agreed that the government had acted in the interests of the general public by making mask wearing in public spaces compulsory. The issue is whether there was compliance across South Africa and in the Vrede Community in Free State Province. In a study done by Aloui-Zarrouk, El Youssfi, Badu, Fagbamigbe, Matoke-Muhia, Ngugi, Dukhi, and Mwaura (2020) on the wearing of face masks in African countries under the COVID-19 crisis: luxury or necessity? They concluded that, among many things, face masks, previously viewed as a luxury and a marker of medical modernity, have become a necessity to enable African economies and populations to remain resilient through this pandemic. This conclusion suggests that governments and health communicators must mobilize the right communication tool to not only inform and educate the people about any pandemic, including COVID-19, but also mobilise them so that they can make informed health choices during health emergencies and crises through the concept, process, and tool of crisis communication.

Theorising and Intersecting Culture with Crisis Communication in the Vrede Community

Culture and Crisis Communication according to George and Kwansah-Aidoo (2017) presents an examination of how politics, culture, religion, and other social issues affect crisis communication and management. Culture plays a role in crisis communication, and this study interrogates if the challenge of wearing a facemask in the Vrede community was a cultural resistance or a crisis communication challenge caused by news outlets, health communicators, technical experts, politicians, or the local community residents during the crisis situations.

It is important to distinguish between the customer and tradition of a people and the cultural reality that they live in, which sometimes is a construction of the environment and thus a myth (Akpan and Mkhize,

2022). To this end, in developing a crisis communication message, the government at the centre will have to take into cognizance the cultural reality of the community by engaging the health workers and health communication planners of the Vrede Community before carrying out a campaign on wearing a facemask so that the myth around it can be demystified.

Culture is an umbrella term that encompasses the collective social behaviour, institutions, and norms found in human societies, and in the Vrede Community, it is not different. It is the way of life of a group of people and the behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2012) argue that culture is learned from one's social environment, which is a construction; it is not inherited through genes. More than three years after the discovery of COVID-19 and in spite of influenza outbreaks that claim thousands of lives each year, there is presently no solid information on how much or whether wearing masks inhibits the transmission of respiratory viruses.

According to Frith (2011)⁶, the majority languages spoken in the Vrede demographic statistics survey are isiZulu (53.4%) and Sotho (36.5%), with Afrikaans (6.0%) and English (1.1%) following closely behind. As a result, it has a wide cultural group, and in order to meet the demands of this different population, the health information provided in the community must be carefully considered. Since it is one of the major settlements in the district municipality in the Free State Province, it has a multilingual character. The community is semi-rural, and the rate of literacy is low.

To this end, government policy workers, health workers, and health communicators will need to upload the cultural matrix and dynamics, and indeed the myths in the Vrede Community, to the agency of government that will be responsible the carrying out a campaign on the use of facemasks; this should be the basis of their crisis communication.

Sanjeev, Pande, and Santhosh Kumar (2021) argue that crisis communication by the government clearly involved four elements: Information management, media management, maintenance of good media relations, and supportive actions. Their conclusion was that the message was centrally managed by the government, and the government was careful in its information management, media management, direct communications, and actions to ensure clear and consistent public messages. They, however, alluded to the fact that the stakeholders should

⁶ <https://census2011.adrianfrith.com/> - Accessed on the 10th February 2023

be taken along, and in fact, communication should be with the stakeholders.

Communicating with the stakeholders is the crux of the matter, and it is the message of this paper. In designing any message on wearing a facemask, the idiosyncrasies of the Vrede community would need to be understood so as to appreciate the right channel and messages that can be crafted in a bespoke manner for them and in a language they understand and that is indigenous to them (Akpan, Mkhize, and Patrick, 2022).

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach to explore the experiences and nuances of the participants perceptions and beliefs about the use of facemasks in the Vrede Community (Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa, & Varpio, 2015).

The University of KwaZulu-Natal granted the study ethical clearance under protocol reference number: HSSREC/00003195/2021. In order to obtain information from the participants—six men and six women—a structured interview was used in the study. Purposive sampling was also used to obtain a non-probability sample that the researcher believed would accurately reflect the opinions of the Vrede community members. The participants' demographics included a mix of gender, age, education, and occupation. The researcher employed a structured interview and kept the duration of the interview to no longer than 60 minutes. The interview was conducted in English and electronically recorded. The information gleaned from the participant interviews and their experiences

Discussion

In a broad sense, "government" refers to a system in which a collection of individuals acts as a management body for the affairs of the populace in any political or geographic area, also referred to as a state. According to Akpan et al. (2022), rules and policies that must be disseminated to the public through the most effective media are the main means by which those who have the authority and power to handle these matters interact continuously. Therefore, communication becomes a government function and a crucial and strategic task that a government must carry out. The importance of communication in how the government interacts with the people cannot be overstated. Governmental communication and public information, for instance, are separated in the Netherlands. Public information entails providing information to the general public via the

media, but government communication is more strategic and sustained as it communicates policies to the people (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Central Information and Public Relations Department, 1997; Aitchison, Bawden, & Gilchrist, 2003). This is an indication that the role of government in public communication is key to the stability and well-being of the state.

Culture, Wearing of Facemasks, and Crisis Communication Approach

The residents of Vrede Community are not different, nor do they have different expectations from the government concerning communication, especially health communication. This expectation becomes more pertinent given the fact that it has to do with them wearing a facemask to prevent a disease that some believe is not consistent with their sociocultural beliefs (Akpan et al., 2022) or that is not even healthy by their own estimation.

A participant who was interviewed said that the mask is not safe for older people and that he would not want his older relatives to use the facemask.

...Would you tell your own gogo, your grandfather or grandmother to wear a mask? Ai no, it not your thing, cause inside those masks, you can't even breathe properly so what the use of wearing them...

Remark from a Participant

This participant, though concerned for his older relatives, is opposed to them wearing the facemask, not necessarily because of any scientific reason since he is not an expert in the field, but just out of sheer love for the relatives. In their work titled *Face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic: a simple protection tool with many meanings*, Martinelli, Kopilaš, Vidmar, Heavin, Machado, Todorović, Buzas, Pot, Prainsack, and Gajović (2021) agreed that the use of a facemask is deeply connected to social and cultural practices and has acquired a variety of personal and social meanings.

It must be seen from the context that many black South Africans have a somewhat spiritual relationship with their parents and grandparents, not just when they are alive, but also when they are dead. Nel (2007) posits that in Zulu culture, for both traditionalist and Christian Zulu, honouring parents, whether alive or dead, is to relate to them with great respect. Edwards, Thwala, Mbele, Siyaya, Ndlazi, and Magwaza (2011) support the notion in their work that the strong ancestral bond in Zulu tradition supports the family adhering to family obligations and responsibilities, not

only in daily life but in death. It was also associated with immediate apprehensions of senior kinsmen, living and dead, of God and/or more generally of the Spirit. However, research shows that wearing face masks is recommended as part of personal protective equipment and as a public health measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Martinelli *et al.*, 2021; ECDC, 2022).

What is needed is a proper appreciation of the culture of the people in the Vrede community, and with that ethnographic nuance, a message encouraging the wearing of a facemask can be developed, and the most appropriate channel of bringing the message to them and the language would be more impactful (Akpan *et al.*, 2022).

Negative Attitudes towards COVID-19 Affect the Wearing of Facemask

In a study titled *Negative attitudes about facemasks during the COVID-19 pandemic: The dual importance of perceived ineffectiveness and psychological reactance*, Taylor and Asmundson (2021) posit that people who object to wearing facemasks are a small but highly vocal minority of individuals. Their refusal to wear facemasks is associated with a range of anti-mask attitudes, at the centre of which is the belief that facemasks are ineffective.

A participant said:

Face masks can only be worn by people who are afraid of COVID, who have seen it? As for me I have never wear this mask...I don't know face mask. Hahaha I only wear face mask when I go to the shop that all...coz I'm forced to wear it... I think the government just needs to let the person be...coz at the end of the day I'm the one who would be sick, isn't it...so just let the person be....

A Remark from a Participant

While the previous participant was more concerned about the health of the older relatives due to his strong adherence to culture, which makes him see his older parents as ancestors that would still be consulted even after death, this participant does not believe COVID-19 is real, and that attitude has affected his/her decision to wear the facemask. However, Taylor & Asmundson (2021) did pose a critical question for psychologists and those involved in public health messaging about the best way of encouraging people with anti-mask attitudes to wear masks. They argued that it is important to consider the motivational roots of mask refusal. Though they profess the handing over of free facemasks, that may still not answer their question since it is an attitudinal issue.

The approach should be twofold. Sanjeev *et al.* (2021) give an insight from their study that for effective crisis communication to take a strong hold, the government must ensure proper information management, media management, the right supportive action, and direct communication with stakeholders. The other part, inclusive stakeholder management, involves the residents of the Vrede community. Steyn & De Beer (2012) argue the government will need to improve its strategic communication, which is critical in a crisis period. They said that the expectations, concerns, values, and norms of stakeholders can be brought to the attention of the government for the purpose of strategy and policy development. Strategic intelligence based on the above could inform the communication strategy and could also be reflected in the country's integrated crisis and strategic communication objectives.

Therefore, the three tiers of government in South Africa ought to work together using a bottom-to-top approach where the municipalities will collate the nuances and other dispositions of the residents of Vrede, which tends to resist the facemask wearing policy, and send the information to the province, who will upload it to the central government. However, the messages that would be cascaded to communities like Vrede must be targeted to the residents as an audience (Mahood & Mody, 1992; Akpan, 2021).

Criminalising and Enforcing the Wearing of a Facemask as a Law

Taylor & Asmundson (2021) noted that from their study, they found those that refuse to wear facemasks are a minority, but they are a vocal minority that can seize the narrative by insisting that they have a fundamental human right to refuse to wear facemasks, and indeed can organise a public protest to sabotage government efforts. In this way, the government would need to not only advocate for the wearing of facemasks to protect the spread of COVID-19 but also initiate and enact laws to protect the public by enforcing the wearing of facemasks, especially in public places.

A participant said:

Yes...I'd say yes because every time the president addresses and even his recent address he say if you don't wear a facemask it is a criminal offence so you could be charged... meaning it serves as a deterrent to people and I think it enough...Some arrests have been, I have seen some arrest that were done in town here in Vrede. The police took some guys in town around Lucky's way market and a lot of people were standing there watching, it also sends the information across. While I was on my way home, I heard people telling 'hey

where's your mask, where's you mask' it shows that it helps to propagate the news

The state has a responsibility to protect its citizens. Morgenstern (1978) argues further that the role of the federal government in protecting citizens from communicable diseases cannot be overemphasised. This paper agrees with Chen, Lee, Dong, and Taniguchi (2021) that governments need to initiate policies to balance public health, livelihoods, and economic support for residents, and also with Easton (1965) that political interactions, like all other kinds of social interactions, are predominantly oriented towards the authoritative allocation of values for a society. However, in the event where resources are hardly enough to meet all public expectations, the government will therefore need to pursue a course of action that will protect the public.

Another participant said:

The government need to do more in terms of encouragement...you see we're in time whereby you need to enforce things a little bit not to deal with the people like getting out of hand but keep on encouraging, keep on talking about it. And the police also need put a little bit of force on it so we abide by the rules.

A Remark from a Participant

To achieve this, the government will need to incentivize a section of the public through advocacy and mobilisation. Roger (2009) agrees and emphasises that the continued importance of civil society organisations (CSO) in partnering with the government to advocate for and mobilise citizens to comply with public health policies is critical and strategic. To this end, the government can partner with local civil society organisations in this advocacy drive to inform and educate the community on the importance of wearing a facemask during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The CSOs are most often local; therefore, they understand the people, their culture, and their nuances, including the channels and local institutions to use in convincing them to wear facemasks. The feedback from the community and municipality can be a source of gathering data for the central government.

When all these measures are put in place, then the government would be morally justified to arrest the minorities that may still refuse to wear masks in public places and also undertake activities that can negatively influence others.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the wearing of a facemask in the Vrede community did not have absolute compliance because of cultural biases, attitudinal dispositions and the laxity of enforcement by the security agencies. It is therefore imperative that the government democratise the understanding of the people and their culture. The municipality and civil society organisations will be useful in gathering these data by adopting an inclusive stakeholder management approach. This information can therefore be uploaded to the province and the central government so that they can better articulate a crisis communication model that will address the concerns of all stakeholders and also enact laws that will enable the security agencies to apprehend the willful violators. The use of facemasks by citizens should be approached from this perspective to protect public health.

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