

## Brief Report

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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.<sup>[1,2]</sup> 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.<sup>[3]</sup> 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.<sup>[4]</sup> 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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- 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 1<sup>st</sup>-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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>[9]</sup>

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.<sup>[10]</sup> 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.<sup>[11,12]</sup> 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.<sup>[13]</sup> 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.<sup>[5]</sup>

### 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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