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Policy Brief

Between environmental concerns and compliance: How does media messaging affect motivation and choice between disposable versus reusable facemasks?

Prof. Nathan Abrams, Dr Anais Augé Mr Maciej Nowakowski, Mr George Roberts, Dr Hayley Roberts, Dr Morwenna Spear, Ms Saffron Steele, Prof. Thora Tenbrink (all Bangor University); Prof. Louise Hassan (Birmingham University); Prof. Simon Willcock (Bangor University & Rothamsted Research)

KEY INFO

Research question: How can we better understand current facemask wearing behaviour as influenced by the media to improve uptake and enhance the effectiveness of media campaigns for the future, specifically considering environmental issues?

Policy area or themes: Guidance, Messaging and Behaviour Change

Methods: Qualitative semi-structured interviews, UK-wide survey of 20,000 people, qualitative semiotic analysis.

Geographical area: UK-wide

Research stage: In progress

Summary of the research

We are an interdisciplinary team drawing on expertise in media, linguistics, environmental sciences, law and business psychology exploring the question of can we make the entire process of protection more sustainable overall? Single-use masks are causing increasing waste as these are disposed of in the environment. Single-use masks contain heavy metals and plastics which, once disposed of in the environment, contaminate natural resources and ultimately citizens through food consumption. This waste is a significant threat to human health which is paired with the COVID-19 pandemic. Citizens thus need to be better informed about the risks so that the waste can be limited. We look to prove the influence of media representations as these can encourage such practices. We analysed representations of masks in a wide range of media contents to decide how messages can be improved so that these effectively address the environmental impact of single-use masks. This is accompanied by a large-scale survey and a series of interviews aimed at showing participants' views on masks and their reliance on media. In total, we have surveyed 19,763 adults (63.3% female and 36.7% male) across the UK and interviewed 18 in depth.

Policy recommendations

- As the environmental effects of single-use masks are enormous, greater awareness is needed.
- Media messages should clearly convey that a) reusable masks are available that are just as safe and comfortable as disposable ones, and b) that disposable masks should be disposed of conscientiously and at best completely avoided.
- Citizens need to be better informed about the risks so that the waste can be limited.
- Terminology may need to be revised and clarified for more consistent use. This also includes the widespread use of the mask required pictogram that, invariably, depicts a single-use mask.
- Policymakers should consider the promotion of sustainable practices through other media.



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- Together with obligations from other international human rights treaties (e.g., UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC]), the UK should look to promote a healthy environment in carrying out all its functions, e.g., encouraging reusable mask-wearing in official messaging.

Key findings

Media Messaging

- Media representations are mostly ignoring the environmental impact of disposable masks.
- Most references are simply to 'masks' which are associated with disposable masks, thus subtly suggesting this as the preferred (or only available) choice. People are therefore not guided in their choice and may believe it doesn't matter – or that disposable masks are safer.
- The official messaging which is pro-disposable masks as almost mandatory is undermined by other media that are more immersive (social media, film, music videos, etc.). Such media reflect much more critical and diverse perspectives on mask wearing, including the use of more sustainable options (cloth face coverings).
- Existing descriptions of the environmental impact of disposable masks insist on the uncertainty about the possibility to recycle the masks, but they downplay the threat represented by the environmental impact.

Behaviour

- Reusable face coverings play a significant role in people's actual behaviour, creating a mismatch with media messaging (which focuses heavily on disposable masks) and associated assumptions as to efficacy and sustainability concerns.
- Many people either firmly believe that disposable face coverings are safer, or they complain that the media should do more to point to the environmental impact of disposable masks.
- Reusable face coverings therefore need to be taken more seriously as an advantageous choice. People need to be clear about disadvantages too rather than speculating about efficacy.
- 94.5 % of those surveyed had worn a face covering between 17/12/2021 and 27/12/2021.
- Most of those surveyed wear reusable face coverings rather than disposable face masks in most settings, but more people tend to wear disposable face coverings in health and medical centres.
- More people wear the surgical/IIR type disposable masks than the more effective FFP type masks, despite ranking efficacy as a key factor when choosing what type of face covering to wear.
- Those who chose not to wear masks do so because they do not believe they are effective.

Sustainability

- Face coverings are unlikely to be recycled and a small proportion are discarded as litter, highlighting a serious sustainability issue when the scale of mask wearing is considered.
- Greenhouse gas emissions (carbon footprint) can vary a considerable amount dependent on how the face masks are used. However, when following NHS guidelines and the face masks manufacturer's instructions, reusable face masks are overall less environmentally impactful.
- International human rights law places responsibilities on states to promote a healthy environment. For example, Art 24 of the UNCRC recognises the right to the best health possible; as part of that, states should consider the risks of environmental pollution when taking steps to combat disease.
- There is a clear link between human rights and the environment, and the recent recognition by the Human Rights Council of a right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment (Resolution 48/13). A healthy environment is critical to the full enjoyment of several key human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, and participation in cultural life.

Contact details

Nathan Abrams

n.abrams@bangor.ac.uk, 01248382196

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