

In COVID-19 health messaging, loss framing increases anxiety with little-to-no concomitant benefits: Experimental evidence from 84 countries.

* corresponding author email: charles.dorison@kellogg.northwestern.edu

| Author | Institution and Affiliation | Email |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Charles A. Dorison | Northwestern University, Kellogg School of Management, Evanston, IL, United States | charles.dorison@kellogg.northwestern.edu |
| Jennifer S. Lerner | Harvard University, Harvard Kennedy School and Department of Psychology, Cambridge, MA, United States | jennifer_lerner@harvard.edu |
| Blake H. Heller | Harvard University, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA, United States | bheller@g.harvard.edu |
| Alexander J. Rothman | University of Minnesota, Department of Psychology, Minneapolis, MN, United States | rothm001@umn.edu |
| Ichiro I. Kawachi | Harvard University, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, United States | ikawachi@hsph.harvard.edu |
| Ke Wang | Harvard University, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, United States | ke_wang@g.harvard.edu |
| Vaughan W. Rees | Harvard University, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, United States | vrees@hsph.harvard.edu |
| Brian P. Gill | Mathematica, Cambridge, MA, United States | bgill@mathematica.org |
| Nancy Gibbs | Harvard University, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, United States | nancy_gibbs@hks.harvard.edu |
| Charles R. Ebersole | University of Virginia, Charlottesville, United States | cebersole@virginia.edu |
| Zahir Vally | United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain, United Arab Emirates | zahir.vally@uaeu.ac.ae |
| | Wolfson College, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom | |

| | | |
|--------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Zuzanna Tajchman | University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Department of Psychology, Minneapolis, United States | ztajchma@umn.edu |
| Andras N. Zsido | Institute of Psychology, University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary | zsido.andras@pte.hu |
| Mija Zrimsek | University of Ljubljana, Department of Translation Studies, Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia | zrimsekm@gmail.com |
| Zhang Chen | Ghent University, Department of Experimental Psychology, Ghent, Belgium | zhang.chen@ugent.be |
| Ignazio Ziano | Grenoble Ecole de Management, Grenoble, France | ziano.ignazio@gmail.com |
| Zoi Gialitaki | Independent Researcher | z.gialitaki@gmail.com |
| Chris D Ceary | Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, United States | cceary@gmail.com |
| Yuna Jang | Independent Researcher | yunajang92@gmail.com |
| Yijun Lin | University of Florida, Department of Psychology, Gainesville, United States | yijun.lin@ufl.edu |
| Yoshihiko Kunisato | Senshu University, Department of Psychology, Kawasaki, Japan | ykunisato@psy.senshu-u.ac.jp |
| Yuki Yamada | Kyushu University, Faculty of Arts and Science, Fukuoka, Japan | yamadayuk@gmail.com |
| Qinyu Xiao | University of Hong Kong, Department of Psychology, Hong Kong SAR, China | xqy1020@connect.hku.hk |
| Xiaoming Jiang | Shanghai International Studies University, Institute of Linguistics, Shanghai, China | xiaoming.jiang@shisu.edu.cn |
| Xinkai Du | University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands | xinkai.du@student.uva.nl |
| Elvin Yao | Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, United States | xiaohui.yao@cgu.edu |

| | | |
|----------------------|---|---|
| William S. Ryan | University of Toronto, St George, Canada | ws.ryan@utoronto.ca |
| John Paul Wilson | Montclair State University, Montclair, United States | johnpaulw@gmail.com |
| Wilson Cyrus-Lai | INSEAD, Singapore | wilson-cyrus.lai@insead.edu |
| William Jimenez-Leal | Universidad de los Andes, Department of Psychology, Bogotá, Colombia | w.jimenezleal@uniandes.edu.co |
| Wilbert Law | The Education University of Hong Kong, Department of Psychology, Hong Kong, SAR China | wlaw@eduhk.hk |
| Wenceslao Unanue | Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, School of Business, Santiago, Chile | wenceslao.unanue@uai.cl |
| W. Matthew Collins | Nova Southeastern University, Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Fort Lauderdale, United States | wc292@nova.edu |
| Karley L. Richard | Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, United States | vymbc@iup.edu |
| Marek Vranka | Charles University, Prague, Czechia | vranka.marek@gmail.com |
| Vladislav Ankushev | HSE University, Moscow, Russia | vladislavankushev@yandex.ru |
| Vidar Schei | NHH Norwegian School of Economics, Department of Strategy and Management, Bergen, Norway | vidar.schei@nhh.no |
| Chloe DePaola | Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, United States | vhvp@iup.edu |
| Veronika Lerche | Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany | veronika.lerche@psychologie.uni- heidelberg.de |
| Vanja Kovic | University of Belgrade, Laboratory for Neurocognition and Applied Cognition, Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade, Serbia | vanja.kovic@f.bg.ac.rs |
| Valerija Križanić | Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Department of Psychology, | vkrizanic@ffos.hr |

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Osijek, Croatia | |
| Veselina Hristova Kadreva | New Bulgarian University, Department of Cognitive Science and Psychology, Sofia, Bulgaria | v.kadreva@gmail.com |
| Vera Cubela Adoric | University of Zadar, Department of Psychology, Zadar, Croatia | vcubela@unizd.hr |
| Ulrich S. Tran | University of Vienna, Department of Cognition, Emotion, and Methods in Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Vienna, Austria | ulrich.tran@univie.ac.at |
| Siu Kit Yeung | University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, SAR China | u3517520@connect.hku.hk |
| Widad Hassan | University of East London, Department of Psychology, Dubai, United Arab Emirates | u1944146@uel.ac.uk |
| Ralph Houston | Independent Researcher | translate@rjfhouston.com |
| Michael A. Machin | University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia | tony.machin@usq.edu.au |
| Tiago J. S. Lima | University of Brasília, Department of Social and Work Psychology, Brasilia, Brazil | tiago.lima@unb.br |
| Thomas Ostermann | Witten/Herdecke University, Department of Psychology and Psychotherapy, Witten, Germany | thomas.ostermann@uni-wh.de |
| Thomas Frizzo | Université de Lorraine, Université de Strasbourg, CNRS, BETA, Nancy, France | thomas.frizzo@gmail.com |
| Therese E Sverdrup | NHH Norwegian School of Economics, Department of Strategy and Management, Bergen, Norway | therese.sverdrup@nhh.no |
| Thea House | Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom | thea.house@students.mq.edu.au |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Tripat Gill | Wilfrid Laurier University, Lazaridis School of Business and Economics, Waterloo, Canada | tgill@wlu.ca |
| Maksim Fedotov | Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Linguistic Studies, Saint Petersburg, Russia | tequila.lime@gmail.com |
| Tamar Paltrow | Independent Researcher | tepaltrow@aol.com |
| Teodor Jernsäter | Stockholm University, Department of Psychology, Stockholm, Sweden | teodor.jernsather@psychology.su.se |
| Tasnim Rahman | University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh | tasnimrahman621@gmail.com |
| Tanya Machin | University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia | Tanya.Machin@usq.edu.au |
| Maria Koptjevskaja- Tamm | Stockholm University, Department of Linguistics, Stockholm, Sweden | tamm@ling.su.se |
| Thomas J. Hostler | Manchester Metropolitan University, Department of Psychology, Manchester, United Kingdom | t.hostler@mmu.ac.uk |
| Tatsunori Ishii | Japan Women's University, Faculty of Integrated Arts and Social Sciences, Tokyo, Japan | t.ishii1108@gmail.com |
| Barnabas Szaszi | ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Institute of Psychology, Budapest, Hungary | szaszi.barnabas@ppk.elte.hu |
| Sylwia Adamus | Jagiellonian University, Institute of Psychology, Krakow, Poland | sylwiadamus@gmail.com |
| Lilian Suter | ZHAW Zurich University of Applied Sciences, School of Applied Psychology, Winterthur, Switzerland | lilian.suter@zhaw.ch |
| Suparpit M. von Bormann | Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand | suparpit@gmail.com |
| Sumaiya Habib | University of Dhaka, Department of Clinical Psychology, Dhaka, Bangladesh | sumaiyahabib14@gmail.com |

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Anna Studzinska | Icam Toulouse, Department of Humanities, Toulouse, France | studzinna@gmail.com |
| Dragana Stojanovska | PSA Psihesko, Skopje, North Macedonia | stojanovskadragana.ds@gmail.com |
| Steve M. J. Janssen | University of Nottingham Malaysia School of Psychology, Semenyih, Malaysia | steve.janssen@nottingham.edu.my |
| Stefan Stieger | Karl Landsteiner University of Health Sciences, Department of Psychology and Psychodynamics, Krems an der Donau, Austria | stefan.stieger@kl.ac.at |
| Stefan E. Schulenberg | University of Mississippi, Department of Psychology, Oxford, Mississippi, United States | sschulen@olemiss.edu |
| | University of Mississippi, Clinical-Disaster Research Center, Oxford, Mississippi, United States | |
| Srinivasan Tatachari | T A Pai Management Institute, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, India | srini.tata@gmail.com |
| Soufian Azouaghe | Mohammed V University in Rabat, Department of Psychology, Rabat, Morocco | s.azouaghe@um5r.ac.ma |
| | Université Grenoble Alpes, LIP/PC2S, Grenoble, France | |
| Piotr Sorokowski | University of Wroclaw, Institute of Psychology, Wroclaw, Poland | sorokowskipiotr@yahoo.co.uk |
| Agnieszka Sorokowska | University of Wroclaw, Institute of Psychology, Wroclaw, Poland | Sorokowska@gmail.com |
| Xin Song | University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Department of Psychology, Minneapolis, United States | songx953@umn.edu |

| | | |
|--------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Sofie Morbée | Department of Developmental, Personality and Social Psychology, Ghent University | Sofie.Morbee@UGent.be |
| Savannah C. Lewis | Ashland University, Ashland, United States | slewis5920@gmail.com |
| Sladjana Sinkolova | PSA Psihesko, Skopje, North Macedonia | sinkolova.s@gmail.com |
| Dmitry Grigoryev | National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia | dgrigoryev@hse.ru |
| Shira Meir Drexler | Department of Neurology, Mauritius Hospital Meerbusch, Meerbusch, Germany | shira.meir@gmail.com |
| Shimrit Daches | Bar-Ilan University, Department of Psychology, Ramat Gan, Israel | shimrit.daches@biu.ac.il |
| Shelby L. Levine | McGill University, Montreal Canada | shelby.levine@mail.mcgill.ca |
| Shawn N. Geniole | University of the Fraser Valley, Department of Psychology, Abbotsford, Canada | shawngeniole@gmail.com |
| Shahunur Akter | University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh | Shahinoorakter27@gmail.com |
| Selena Vračar | University of Belgrade, Department of Psychology, Belgrade, Serbia | selenavracar1410@gmail.com |
| Sébastien Massoni | Université de Lorraine, Université de Strasbourg, CNRS, BETA, Nancy, France | sebastien.massoni@gmail.com |
| Sebastiano Costa | Università degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli, Caserta, Italy | sebastiano.costa@unicampania.it |
| Saša Zorjan | University of Maribor, Department of Psychology, Maribor, Slovenia | sasa.zorjan1@um.si |
| Eylül Sarioğuz | University of Başkent, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Psychology , Ankara, Turkey | sarioguzeylul@gmail.com |

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| Sara Morales Izquierdo | University of Warwick, Coventry United Kingdom | sara.morales-izquierdo@warwick.ac.uk |
| Sarah Suzette Tshonda | Independent Researcher | sarahsuzette91@gmail.com |
| Sara G Alves | University of Porto, Center for Psychology at University of Porto, Porto, Portugal | up201304933@edu.fpce.up.pt |
| Sara Pöntinen | Åbo Akademi University, Faculty of Arts, Psychology, and Theology, Turku, Finland | sara.pontinen@gmail.com |
| Sara Álvarez Solas | Universidad Regional Amazónica Ikiam, Grupo de investigación en Biogeografía y Ecología Espacial (BioGeoE2), Tena, Ecuador | sara.alvarez.solas@gmail.com |
| Santiago Ordoñez- Riaño | University of Guadalajara, Guadalajara, Colombia | santiagoordz@gmail.com |
| Sanja Batić Očovaj | Union University, Faculty of Legal and Business Studies Dr Lazar Vrkatic, Department of Psychology, Novi Sad, Serbia | sanja.batic@gmail.com |
| Sandersan Onie | Black Dog Institute, Sydney, Australia University of New South Wales, School of Psychology, Sydney, Australia Emotional Health for All Foundation, Australia | sandy.onie@gmail.com |
| Samuel Lins | University of Porto, Center for Psychology at University of Porto, Porto, Portugal | samuellins@fpce.up.pt |
| Theresa Biberauer | University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa | samt23@gmail.com |

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| | University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa | |
| Sami Çoksan | Erzurum Technical University, Department of Psychology, Erzurum, Turkey | sami.coksan@erzurum.edu.tr |
| Sakda Khumkom | Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand | sakdakh@sut.ac.th |
| Asli Sacakli | Independent Researcher | sacakliasli@gmail.com |
| Susana Ruiz-Fernández | FOM University of Applied Sciences, Essen, Germany | susana.ruiz-fernandez@psychology-research.de |
| Sandra J. Geiger | University of Amsterdam, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Amsterdam, Netherlands | sandra.geiger@univie.ac.at |
| Saeideh FatahModares | Urmia University, Department of Sport Management, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Science, Urmia, Iran | s.fmodares@yahoo.com |
| Radoslaw B. Walczak | University of Opole, Institute of Psychology, Opole, Poland | rwalczak@uni.opole.pl |
| Ruben Betlehem | Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, Osijek, Croatia | rbetlehem@ffos.hr |
| Roosevelt Vilar | Universidade Cruzeiro do Sul, São Paulo, Brazil | roosevelt.vilar@gmail.com |
| Roos Doekemeijer | Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium | roos@doekemeijer.nl |
| Rodrigo Cárcamo | University of Magallanes, Department of Psychology, Punta Arenas, Chile | rodrigo.carcamo@umag.cl |
| Robert M Ross | Macquarie University, Department of Psychology, Sydney, Australia | robross46@gmail.com |

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Randy McCarthy | Northern Illinois University Department of Psychology, DeKalb, United States | rmccarthy3@niu.edu |
| Tonia Ballantyne | Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, United States | rjxx@iup.edu |
| Erin C. Westgate | University of Florida, Department of Psychology, Gainesville, United States | erinwestgate@ufl.edu |
| Rafael Gargurevich | Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, Lima, Peru | rgargurevich@pucp.pe |
| Reza Afhami | Tarbiat Modares University, Department of Art Studies, Tehran, Iran | Afhami@modares.ac.ir |
| Dongning Ren | Tilburg University, Department of Social Psychology, Tilburg, Netherlands | d.ren@uvt.nl |
| Renan P. Monteiro | Federal University of Mato Grosso, Department of Psychology, Cuiabá, Brazil | renanpmonteiro@gmail.com |
| Ulf-Dietrich Reips | University of Konstanz, Department of Psychology, Konstanz, Switzerland | reips@uni-konstanz.de |
| Niv Reggev | Ben Gurion University, Department of Psychology and Zlotowski Center for Neuroscience, Beersheba, Israel | reggevn@bgu.ac.il |
| Robert J Calin- Jageman | Dominican University, Department of Psychology, River Forest, United States | rcalinjageman@dom.edu |
| Razieh Pourafshari | University of Tehran, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Tehran, Iran | razieh.pourafshari@gmail.com |
| Raquel London | Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium | raquellondon@gmail.com |
| Raquel Oliveira | Iscte-University Institute of Lisbon, CIS-IUL, Lisbon, Portugal | rsaoa@iscte-iul.pt |

| | Intelligent Agents and Synthetic Characters Group (GAIPS), INESC-ID, Lisbon, Portugal | |
|-----------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Mina Nedelcheva-Datsova | Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Department of General, Experimental, Developmental, and Health Psychology, Sofia, Bulgaria | raiskopruskalo@gmail.com |
| Rima-Maria Rahal | Tilburg University, Department of Social Psychology, Tilburg, Netherlands | r.m.rahal@tilburguniversity.edu |
| Rafael R Ribeiro | ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, CIS-IUL, Lisbon, Portugal | rafael_ribeiro@iscte-iul.pt |
| Theda Radtke | University of Wuppertal, Department of Psychology, Wuppertal, Germany | Radtke@uni-wuppertal.de |
| Rachel Searston | The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia | rachel.searston@adelaide.edu.au |
| Rachadaporn Jai-ai | Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand | rachadaporn@sut.ac.th |
| Redeate Habte | Jacobs University Bremen, Bremen, Germany | redhabte@gmail.com |
| Przemysław Zdybek | University of Opole, Institute of Psychology, Opole, Poland | pzdybek@uni.opole.pl |
| Sau-Chin Chen | Tzu-Chi University, Department of Human Development and Psychology, Hualien, Taiwan | pmsp96@gmail.com |
| Piyaorn Wajanatinapart | Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand | piyaorn@g.sut.ac.th |
| Princess Lovella G. Maturan | University of the Philippines Diliman, Department of Psychology, Quezon City, Philippines | pgmaturan@up.edu.ph |
| Jennifer T Perillo | Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Department of Psychology, Indiana, United States | jperillo@iup.edu |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| Peder Mortvedt Isager | Eindhoven University of Technology, Department of Industrial Engineering and Innovation Sciences, Eindhoven, Netherlands | pederisager@gmail.com |
| Pavol Kačmár | Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, Košice, Slovakia | pavol.kacmar@upjs.sk |
| Paulo Manuel Macapagal | Arellano University, School of Psychology, Manila, Philippines | paulo.macapagal@arellano.edu.ph |
| Michael R. Maniaci | Department of Psychology, Florida Atlantic University | mmaniaci@fau.edu |
| Paulina Szwed | Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland | paulina.szwed@uj.edu.pl |
| Paul H. P. Hanel | University of Essex, Essex, United Kingdom | p.hanel@essex.ac.uk |
| Paul A G Forbes | University of Vienna, Social, Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience Unit, Department of Cognition, Emotion, and Methods in Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Vienna, Austria | paul.forbes@univie.ac.at |
| Patrícia Arriaga | Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, CIS-IUL, Lisbon, Portugal | patricia.arriaga@iscte-iul.pt |
| Bastien Paris | Université Grenoble Alpes, Grenoble, France | paris.bastien@hotmail.com |
| Neha Parashar | Sampurna Montfort College, Bangalore, India | parashar3@gmail.com |
| Konstantinos Papachristopoulos | Concordia University, Montreal, Canada | papachristopouloskostas@gmail.com |
| Konstantinos Papachristopoulos | Athens University of Economics and Business, Athens, Greece | papachristopouloskostas@gmail.com |
| Pablo Sebastián Correa | Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Instituto de Investigaciones Psicológicas (IIPsi) Consejo Nacional | pablocorrea@unc.edu.ar |

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| | de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Córdoba, Argentina | |
| Ondřej Kácha | University of Cambridge, Department of Psychology, Cambridge, United Kingdom | oek22@cantab.ac.uk |
| Márcia Bernardo | Universidade do Porto, Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação, Porto, Portugal | oliviabernardo95@gmail.com |
| Olatz Campos | University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain | olatzcampos4@gmail.com |
| Olalla Niño Bravo | Independent Researcher | olallanino3@gmail.com |
| Oscar J Galindo-Caballero | Universidad de los Andes, Department of Psychology, Bogotá, Colombia Universidad Manuela Beltran, Faculty of Education, Human and Social Sciences, Bogotá, Colombia. | oj.galindo10@uniandes.edu.co |
| Chisom Esther Ogonnaya | Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Nigeria | ogbonnaya.chisom@yahoo.com |
| Olga Bialobrzaska | SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland | obialobrzaska@swps.edu.pl |
| Natalia Kiselnikova | Psychological Institute of Russian Academy of Education, Moscow, Russia | nv_psy@mail.ru |
| Nicolle Simonovic | Kent State University, Department of Psychological Sciences, Kent, United States | nsimonov@kent.edu |
| Noga Cohen | University of Haifa, Department of Special Education and The Edmond J. Safra Brain Research Center for the Study of Learning Disabilities, Haifa, Israel | noga.cohen@edu.haifa.ac.il |
| Nora L. Nock | Case Western Reserve University, Department of Population and Quantitative Health Sciences, School of Medicine, Cleveland, United States | nln@case.edu |

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| Alejandrina Hernandez | Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico | nina.hp@hotmail.com |
| Cecilie Thogersen-Ntoumani | University of Southern Denmark, Department of Sports Sciences and Clinical Biomechanics, Odense, Denmark | cthogersen@health.sdu.dk |
| Nikos Ntoumanis | University of Southern Denmark, Department of Sports Sciences and Clinical Biomechanics, Odense, Denmark | nntoumanis@health.sdu.dk |
| Niklas Johannes | University of Oxford, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford, United Kingdom | niklas.johannes@oii.ox.ac.uk |
| Nihan Albayrak-Aydemir | Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom & London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom | nihan.albayrak-aydemir@open.ac.uk |
| Nicolas Say | Prague University of Economics and Business, Prague, Czechia | sayn00@vse.cz |
| Andreas B. Neubauer | DIPF Leibniz Institute for Research and Information in Education, Germany | neubauer.andreas@dipf.de |
| Neil I. Martin | University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia | neil.martin@usq.edu.au |
| Nathan Torunsky | University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Department of Psychology, Minneapolis, United States | torun005@umn.edu |
| Natasha van Antwerpen | University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia | vananata10@gmail.com |
| Natalia Van Doren | The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Psychology, State College, United States | nataliavandoren@psu.edu |
| Naoyuki Sunami | University of Delaware, Newark, United States | nsunami@udel.edu |

| | | |
|------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Nikolay R. Rachev | Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Department of General, Experimental, Developmental, and Health Psychology, Sofia, Bulgaria | nrrachev@phls.uni-sofia.bg |
| Nadyanna M Majeed | Singapore Management University, School of Social Sciences, Singapore | nadyannam.2020@msps.smu.edu.sg |
| Nadya-Daniela Schmidt | University of Hildesheim, Institute of Psychology, Hildesheim, Germany | schmidtn@uni-hildesheim.de |
| Khaoula Nadif | Independent Researcher | nadifkhaoula@gmail.com |
| Nadia S Corral-Frías | Universidad de Sonora, Sonora, México | nadia.corral@unison.mx |
| Nihal Ouherrou | Paul Valery Montpellier 3 University, Lhumain Laboratory, Montpellier, France | nihal.ouherrou@umontpellier.fr |
| Nida Abbas | Jacobs University Bremen, Bremen, Germany | adinxabbas@gmail.com |
| Myrto Pantazi | University of Oxford, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford, United Kingdom | myrto.pantazi@oii.ox.ac.uk |
| Marc Y Lucas | Universidad de Sonora, Department of Psychology, Sonora, Mexico | mylucas@email.arizona.edu |
| Martin R. Vasilev | Bournemouth University, Department of Psychology, Poole, United Kingdom | mvasilev@bournemouth.ac.uk |
| María Victoria Ortiz | Instituto de Investigaciones Psicológicas (IIPsi) - CONICET – UNC Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Facultad de Psicología, Córdoba, Argentina | mv.ortiz@unc.edu.ar |
| Muhammad Mussaffa Butt | Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan | mussaffa@gmail.com |
| Murathan Kurfalı | Stockholm University, Linguistics Department, Stockholm, Sweden | murathan.kurfali@ling.su.se |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| Muhib Kabir | Bangladesh Clinical Psychology Society, Dhaka, Bangladesh | Muhib_cu@yahoo.com |
| Rafał Muda | Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Faculty of Economics, Lublin, Poland | muda.research@gmail.com |
| María del Carmen MC Tejada Rivera | University of Desarrollo, Concepción, Chile | mtejadar@udd.cl |
| Miroslav Sirota | University of Essex, Department of Psychology, Colchester, United Kingdom | msirota@essex.ac.uk |
| Martin Seehuus | Middlebury College, Department of Psychology, Middlebury, United States University of Vermont, Vermont Psychological Services, Burlington, United States | mseehuus@middlebury.edu |
| Michał Parzuchowski | SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Sopot, Center for Research on Cognition and Behavior, Sopot, Poland | mparzuchowski@swps.edu.pl |
| Mónica Toro | Universidad Del Desarrollo, Centro de Apego y Regulación Emocional, Facultad de Psicología, Concepción, Chile | motorov@udd.cl |
| Monika Hricova | Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, Košice, Slovakia | monika.hricova@upjs.sk |
| Mónica Alarcón Maldonado | Independent Researcher | |
| Panagiotis Rentzelas | School of Social Sciences, Birmingham City University | Panagiotis.Rentzelas@bcu.ac.uk |
| Maarten Vansteenkiste | Department of Developmental, Personality and Social Psychology, Ghent University | Maarten.Vansteenkiste@ugent.be |
| Molly A. Metz | University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada | molly.metz@utoronto.ca |

| | | |
|----------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Magdalena Marszalek | SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland | mmarszalek4@st.swps.edu.pl |
| Maria Karekla | University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus | mkarekla@ucy.ac.cy |
| Giovanna Mioni | University of Padova, Department of General Psychology, Padua, Italy | giovanna.mioni@unipd.it |
| Minke Jasmijn Bosma | University of Amsterdam, Department of Psychology, Amsterdam, Netherlands | minke.bosma@student.uva.nl |
| Minja Westerlund | Åbo Akademi University, Faculty of Arts, Psychology, and Theology, Turku, Finland | minja.westerlund@abo.fi |
| Milica Vdovic | Singidunum University, Faculty of Media and Communications, Department of Psychology, Belgrade, Serbia | milica.vdovic@fmk.edu.rs |
| Michal Bialek | University of Wroclaw, Institute of Psychology, Wroclaw, Poland | michal.bialek3@uwr.edu.pl |
| Miguel A. Silan | University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines | MiguelSilan@gmail.com |
| Michele Anne | University of Nottingham Malaysia, School of Psychology, Semenyih, Malaysia | michele.anne@dmu.ac.uk |
| Michal Misiak | University of Wroclaw, IDN Being Human Lab, Wroclaw, Poland University of Oxford, School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography, Oxford, United Kingdom | michal.misiak@uwr.edu.pl |
| Maria C. Gugliandolo | University of Messina, Messina, Italy | mgugliandolo@unime.it |
| Maurice Grinberg | New Bulgarian University, Department of Cognitive Science and Psychology, Research Center for Cognitive Science, Sofia, Bulgaria | mgrinberg@nbu.bg |

| | | |
|--------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Mariagrazia Capizzi | Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, Montpellier, France | mgcapizzi@hotmail.com |
| Mauricio F. Espinoza Barría | Universidad del Desarrollo, Centre of Attachment and Emotional Regulation, Faculty of Psychology, Santiago, Chile | mespinozab@udd.cl |
| Merve A. Kurfali | Bilkent University, Department of Political Science, Ankara, Turkey | merve.akdemir@bilkent.edu.tr |
| Michael C Mensink | University of Wisconsin-Stout, Department of Psychology, Menomonie, United States | mensinkm@uwstout.edu |
| Mikayel Harutyunyan | Charles University, Institute of Economic Studies, Prague, Czechia | 75686400@fsv.cuni.cz |
| Meetu Khosla | University of Delhi, Psychology Department, DRC, Delhi, India | meetukhosla@yahoo.co.in |
| Megan R. Dunn | Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, USA | mdunn2@hawk.iit.edu |
| Max Korbmacher | Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Bergen, Norway | max.korbmacher@gmail.com |
| Matúš Adamkovič | University of Presov, Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, Presov, Slovakia CSPS Slovak Academy of Sciences, Institute of Social Sciences, Slovakia | matho.adamkovic@gmail.com |
| Matheus Fernando Felix Ribeiro | University of Brasilia, Institute of Psychology, Brasilia, Brazil | matheusfelix.psi@gmail.com |
| Maria Terskova | National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia | materskova@gmail.com |
| Matej Hruška | Comenius University in Bratislava, Institute of European Studies and International Relations, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia | matej.hruska@fses.uniba.sk |

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Marcel Martončík | University of Presov, Faculty of Arts, Presov, Slovakia; Institute of Social Sciences, CSPS SAS, Slovakia | martoncik@protonmail.ch |
| Martine Jansen | Fontys University of Applied Sciences, Eindhoven, Netherlands | martine.jansen@gmail.com |
| Martin Voracek | University of Vienna, Department of Cognition, Emotion, and Methods in Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Vienna, Austria | martin.voracek@univie.ac.at |
| Martin Čadek | Leeds Beckett University, Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds, United Kingdom | marti.cadek@gmail.com |
| Martha Frías-Armenta | Universidad de Sonora, Sonora, México | martha.frias@unison.mx |
| Marta Kowal | University of Wroclaw, Institute of Psychology, Wroclaw, Poland | marta7kowal@gmail.com |
| Marta Topor | University of Surrey, School of Psychology, Guildford, United Kingdom | m.topor@surrey.ac.uk |
| Marta Roczniowska | SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Sopot, Department of Psychology, Sopot, Poland Karolinska Institutet, Department of Learning, Informatics, Management, and Ethics, Stockholm, Sweden | marta.roczniowska@swps.edu.pl |
| Marlies Oosterlinck | Independent Researcher | marliesoosterlinck@gmail.com |
| Markéta Braun Kohlová | Charles University, Environment Centre, Czechia | marketa.braun.kohlova@czp.cuni.cz |
| Mariola Paruzel-Czachura | University of Silesia in Katowice, Institute of Psychology, Poland & Universidad Complutense Madrid, Facultad de Psicología, Spain | mariola.paruzel-czachura@us.edu.pl |
| Marina Sabristov | Independent Researcher | marina.sabristov@gmail.com |
| Marina Romanova | HSE University, Moscow, Russia | marina.romanova.msk@gmail.com |

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Marietta Papadatou-Pastou | National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece | marietta.papadatou-pastou@seh.oxon.org |
| Maria Louise Lund | University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway | marialouiselund@hotmail.com |
| Maria Antoniadis | University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus | maria.antoniadis867@gmail.com |
| Maria Elena Magrin | University of Milano – Bicocca, Italy | mariaelena.magrin@unimib.it |
| Marc V Jones | Manchester Metropolitan University, Department of Psychology, Manchester, United Kingdom | marc.jones@mmu.ac.uk |
| Manuel S Ortiz | Universidad de La Frontera, Departamento de Psicología. Laboratorio de Estrés y Salud, Temuco, Chile | manuel.ortiz@ufrontera.cl |
| Mathi Manavalan | University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Department of Psychology, Minneapolis, United States | manav003@umn.edu |
| Abdumalik Muminov | Independent Researcher | malik.traductor@gmail.com |
| Małgorzata Kossowska | Jagiellonian University, Department of Philosophy, Institute of Psychology, Krakow, Poland | malgorzata.kossowska@uj.edu.pl |
| Maja Friedemann | University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom | maja.friedemann@sjc.ox.ac.uk |
| Magdalena Wielgus | Jagiellonian University, Institute of Applied Psychology, Krakow, Poland | magda.wielgus@uj.edu.pl |
| Madelon L.M. van Hooff | Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands | madelon.vanhooff@ru.nl |
| Marco A. C. Varella | University of São Paulo, Institute of Psychology, Department of Experimental Psychology, São Paulo, Brazil | macvarella@usp.br |
| Martyn Standage | University of Bath, Department for Health Centre for Motivation and | m.standage@bath.ac.uk |

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| | Health Behaviour Change, United Kingdom | |
| Matilde Nicolotti | University of Milano-Bicocca, Department of Psychology, Milan, Italy | m.nicolotti@campus.unimib.it |
| Melissa F Colloff | University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom | m.colloff@bham.ac.uk |
| Maria Bradford | Universidad de los Andes, Department of Psychology, Bogotá, Colombia | m.bradford10@uniandes.edu.co |
| Leigh Ann Vaughn | Ithaca College, Ithaca, United States | Lvaughn@ithaca.edu |
| Luis Eudave | University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain | luiseudave@gmail.com |
| Luc Vieira | Université de Paris, Paris, France | lucvieira@protonmail.com |
| Lina Maria Sanabria Pineda | Universidad de los Andes, Department of Psychology, Bogotá, Colombia | lsanabriapineda@gmail.com |
| Lennia Matos | Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, Lima, Peru | lmatosf@pucp.pe |
| Laura Calderón Pérez | Universidad de los Andes, Department of Psychology, Bogotá, Colombia | lm.calderon10@uniandes.edu.co |
| Ljiljana B. Lazarevic | University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade, Serbia | ljiljana.lazarevic@f.bg.ac.rs |
| Lisa M Jaremka | University of Delaware, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Newark, United States | ljaremka@udel.edu |
| Eline S. Smit | University of Amsterdam/ASCoR, Amsterdam, Netherlands | E.S.Smit@uva.nl |
| Elizaveta Kushnir | Independent Researcher | lizakushnir@yandex.ru |
| Lisa J. Ferguson | Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom | lisa2.ferguson@northumbria.ac.uk |

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Lisa Anton-Boicuk | University of Vienna, Social, Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience Unit, Department of Cognition, Emotion, and Methods in Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Vienna, Austria | lisa.anton-boicuk@univie.ac.at |
| Gabriel Lins de Holanda Coelho | University College Cork, Cork, Ireland | linshc@gmail.com |
| Lina Ahlgren | Åbo Akademi University, Faculty of Arts, Psychology and Theology, Turku, Finland | lina.ahlgren@gmail.com |
| Francesca Liga | Università di Messina, Dipartimento DIMED, Messina, Italy | ligaf@unime.it |
| Carmel A Levitan | Occidental College, Department of Cognitive Science, Los Angeles, United States | levitan@oxy.edu |
| Leticia Micheli | Leibniz University Hannover, Institute of Psychology, Hanover, Germany | micheli@psychologie.uni-hannover.de |
| Lesley-Ann Gunton | Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom | lesley-ann.gunton@northumbria.ac.uk |
| Leonhard Volz | University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands | leonhard.volz@gmail.com |
| Marija Stojanovska | PSA Psihesko, Skopje, North Macedonia | lemarija22@gmail.com |
| Leanne Boucher | Nova Southeastern University, Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Fort Lauderdale, United States | lb1079@nova.edu |
| Lara Samojlenko | University of Primorska, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Information Technologies, Koper, Slovenia | lara.samojlenko@gmail.com |
| Lady Grey Javela Delgado | Universidad del Rosario, Programa de Psicología, Bogotá, Colombia | lady.javela@urosario.edu.co |

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Lada Kaliska | Matej Bel University, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education, Banska Bystrica, Slovakia | lada.kaliska@umb.sk |
| Beatrix Labadi | University of Pécs, Institute of Psychology, Pécs, Hungary | labadi.beatrix@pte.hu |
| Lara Warmelink | Lancaster University, Department of Psychology, Lancaster, United Kingdom | l.warmelink@lancaster.ac.uk |
| Luis Miguel Rojas-Berscia | University of Queensland, School of Languages and Cultures, Brisbane, Australia Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Centro de Estudios Orientales, Lima, Peru | lmrojasb@pucp.pe |
| Karen Yu | Sewanee: The University of the South, Department of Psychology, Sewanee, United States | kyu@sewanee.edu |
| Keith Wylie | Emporia State University, Emporia, United States | kwylie@emporia.edu |
| Jakub Wachowicz | Independent Researcher | kubawachowicz7@gmail.com |
| Kermeka Desai | Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, United States | kermeka@gmail.com |
| Krystian Barzykowski | Jagiellonian University, Institute of Psychology, Krakow, Poland | krystian.barzykowski@uj.edu.pl |
| Luca Kozma | University of Pécs, Institute of Psychology, Pécs, Hungary University of the West of Scotland, School of Education and Social Sciences, Division of Psychology, Paisley, Scotland | luca.kozma@uws.ac.uk |
| Kortnee Evans | Murdoch University, College of Science, Health, Engineering and Education, Perth, Australia | kortnee.evans@education.wa.edu.au |
| Komila Kirgizova | Independent Researcher | komila@hotmail.it |

| | | |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Bamikole Emmanuel Agesin | Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria | koleagesin@yahoo.com |
| Monica A Koehn | University of Canberra, Discipline of Psychology, Faculty of Health, Canberra, Australia | koehn.monica@gmail.com |
| Kelly Wolfe | University of Edinburgh, Department of Psychology, Edinburgh, United Kingdom | kwolfe@ed.ac.uk |
| Tatiana Korobova | London Gates Education Group, Moscow, Russia | klushca@gmail.com |
| Katherine Morris | Willamette University, Salem, United States | klmorris249@gmail.com |
| Kristoffer Klevjer | UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Department of Psychology, Tromsø, Norway | klevjer@gmail.com |
| Kevin van Schie | Erasmus University Rotterdam, Department of Psychology, Education & Child Studies, Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Rotterdam, Netherlands University of Cambridge, MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, Cambridge, United Kingdom | kevinvschie@gmail.com |
| Kevin Vezirian | Université Grenoble Alpes, LIP/PC2S, Grenoble, France | kevin.vezirian@gmail.com |
| Kaja Damjanović | The University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Psychology, Institute of Philosophy, Belgrade, Serbia | kdamnjan@f.bg.ac.rs |
| Katrine Krabbe Thommesen | University of Copenhagen, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, Copenhagen, Denmark | katrinekrabbe@gmail.com |
| Kathleen Schmidt | Southern Illinois University, School of Psychological and Behavioral Sciences, Carbondale, United States | kathleen.schmidt@siu.edu |

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Katarzyna Filip | Jagiellonian University, Institute of Psychology, Krakow, Poland | katarzyna.filip95@gmail.com |
| Karolina Stanciaszek | Independent Researcher | karolina.stanciaszek@gmail.com |
| Karolina Grzech | University of Valencia, Valencia, Spain Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden | szarota@gmail.com |
| Karlijn Hoyer | Tilburg University, Tilburg, Netherlands | karlijnhoyer@gmail.com |
| Karis Moon | Kingston University London, Department of Management, Kingston, United Kingdom | Karisamoon@gmail.com |
| Sirikon Khaobunmasiri | Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand | kanjana@sut.ac.th |
| Kafeel Rana | Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan | kafeelrana87@gmail.com |
| Kristina Janjić | PSA Psihesko, Skopje, North Macedonia | k.janjic@yahoo.com |
| Jordan W Suchow | Stevens Institute of Technology, School of Business, Hoboken, United States | jws@stevens.edu |
| Julita Kiełińska | Jagiellonian University, Institute of Psychology, Krakow, Poland | julita.kielinska@alumni.uj.edu.pl |
| Julio E Cruz Vásquez | Universidad de los Andes, Department of Psychology Bogotá, Colombia | julioeduardocruz@gmail.com |
| Julien Chanal | University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland | julien.chanal@unige.ch |
| Julia Beitner | Goethe University Frankfurt, Department of Psychology, Frankfurt am Main, Germany | beitner@psych.uni-frankfurt.de |
| Juan Camilo Vargas-Nieto | Universidad de los Andes, Department of Psychology, Bogotá, Colombia | juanvargaspsicologia@gmail.com |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Jose Carlos T Roxas | University of the Philippines Diliman, Department of Psychology, Quezon City, Philippines De La Salle College of Saint Benilde, Department of Psychology, Antipolo, Philippines | jtroxas@up.edu.ph |
| Jennifer Taber | Kent State University, Department of Psychological Sciences, Kent, United States | jtaber1@kent.edu |
| Joan Urriago-Rayo | Independent Researcher | joan.urriago.rayo@gmail.com |
| Jeffrey M. Pavlaci | University of Mississippi, Department of Psychology, Oxford, Mississippi, United States | jpavlaci@go.olemiss.edu |
| Jozef Benka | Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Košice, Slovakia | jozef.benka@upjs.sk |
| Jozef Bavolar | Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, Košice, Slovakia | jozef.bavolar@upjs.sk |
| José A. Soto | The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Psychology, State College, United States | josesoto@psu.edu |
| Jonas K Olofsson | Stockholm University, Department of Psychology, Stockholm, Sweden | jonas.olofsson@psychology.su.se |
| Johannes K Vilsmeier | University of Vienna, Department of Cognition, Emotion, and Methods in Psychology, Vienna, Austria | johannes.vilsmeier@univie.ac.at |
| Johanna Messerschmidt | Leipzig University, Institute of Psychology, Leipzig, Germany | johanna.messerschmidt@gmail.com |
| Johanna Czamanski- Cohen | University of Haifa, School of Creative Arts Therapies, Haifa, Israel University of Haifa, Emili Sagol Creative Arts Therapies Research Center, Haifa, Israel | joczamanski@gmail.com |
| Joachim Waterschoot | Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium | joachim.waterschoot@ugent.be |

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Jennifer D. Moss | Emporia State University, Department of Psychology, Emporia, United States | jmos3@emporia.edu |
| Jordane Boudesseul | Universidad de Lima, Facultad de Psicología, Instituto de Investigación Científica, Lima, Peru | jmj.boudesseul@gmail.com |
| Jeong Min Lee | Georgia State University, Department of Psychology, Atlanta, United States | jlee500@gsu.edu |
| Julia Kamburidis | Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Department of General, Experimental, Developmental, and Health Psychology, Sofia, Bulgaria | jkamburidis@gmail.com |
| Jennifer A Joy-Gaba | Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, United States | jjoygaba@vcu.edu |
| Janis Zickfeld | Aarhus University, Department of Management, Aarhus, Denmark | jhzickfeld@gmail.com |
| Jacob F Miranda | The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Department of Psychology, Tuscaloosa, United States | jfmiranda@crimson.ua.edu |
| Jeroen P. H. Verharen | University of California Berkeley, Department of Molecular and Cell Biology, Berkeley, United States | jeroenverharen@berkeley.edu |
| Evgeniya Hristova | New Bulgarian University, Cognitive Science and Psychology Department, Sofia, Bulgaria | ehristova@cogs.nbu.bg |
| Julie E. Beshears | Alliant International University, San Diego, United States | jeb1118@comcast.net |
| Jasna Milošević Đorđević | Singidunum University, Faculty of Media and Communication, Belgrade, Serbia | jasna.milosevic@yahoo.com |
| Jasmijn Bosch | University of Milan-Bicocca, Milan, Italy | Jasmijn.e.bosch@gmail.com |
| Jaroslava Varella Valentova | University of São Paulo, Institute of Psychology, Department of | jaroslava@usp.br |

| | | |
|-------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| | Experimental Psychology, São Paulo, Brazil | |
| Jan Antfolk | Åbo Akademi University, Faculty of Arts, Psychology and Theology, Turku, Finland | jantfolk@abo.fi |
| Jana B. Berkessel | University of Mannheim, Mannheim Centre for European Social Research, Mannheim, Germany | jana.berkessel@uni-mannheim.de |
| Jana Schrötter | Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, 1st Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Košice, Slovakia | jana.schrotter@upjs.sk |
| Jan Urban | Charles University, Environment Centre, Czechia | jan.urban@czp.cuni.cz |
| Jan Philipp Röer | Witten/Herdecke University, Department of Psychology, Witten, Germany | jan.roeer@uni-wh.de |
| James O Norton | Murdoch University, College of Science, Health, Engineering & Education, Perth, Australia | james.norton@murdoch.edu.au |
| Jaime R Silva | Universidad del Desarrollo, Facultad de Psicología, Santiago, Chile Clínica Alemana de Santiago, Chile Sociedad Desarrollo Emocional, Chile | jaimesilva@udd.cl |
| Jade S Pickering | University of Southampton, School of Psychology, Southampton, United Kingdom | j.s.pickering@soton.ac.uk |
| Jáchym VINTR | Charles University, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, Prague, Czechia | vintrj@student.cuni.cz |
| Jim Uttley | University of Sheffield, School of Architecture, Sheffield, United Kingdom | j.uttley@sheffield.ac.uk |
| Jonas R Kunst | University of Oslo, Department of Psychology, Oslo, Norway | j.r.kunst@psykologi.uio.no |

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Izuchukwu L. G. Ndukaihe | Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Department of Psychology, Ndufu-Alike, Nigeria | izumario@yahoo.co.uk |
| Aishwarya Iyer | Sampurna Montfort College, Bangalore, India | iyeraishwarya.work@gmail.com |
| Iris Vilares | University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Department of Psychology, Minneapolis, United States | ivilares@umn.edu |
| Aleksandr Ivanov | HSE University, Moscow, Russia | ivansash21112@mail.ru |
| Ivan Ropovik | Charles University, Faculty of Education, Institute for Research and Development of Education, Prague, Czechia | ivan.ropovik@gmail.com |
| | University of Presov, Faculty of Education, Presov, Slovakia | |
| Isabela Sula | Independent Researcher | isabela.sula1997@gmail.com |
| Irena Sarieva | HSE University, Moscow, Russia | isarieva@hse.ru |
| Irem Metin-Orta | Atilim University, Department of Psychology, Ankara, Turkey | irem.metin@atilim.edu.tr |
| Irina Prusova | National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia | iprusova@hse.ru |
| Isabel Pinto | University of Porto, Center for Psychology at University of Porto, Porto, Portugal | ipinto@fpce.up.pt |
| Andreea Ioana Bozdoc | Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Department of Psychology, Sibiu, Romania | ioanabozdoc@gmail.com |
| Inês A. T. Almeida | University of Coimbra, Faculty of Medicine FMUC, Institute of Nuclear Sciences Applied to Health ICNAS, Coimbra Institute for Biomedical Imaging and Translational Research CIBIT, Coimbra, Portugal | italmeida@fmed.uc.pt |

| | | |
|------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Ilse L. Pit | University of Oxford, Institute of Human Sciences, Oxford, United Kingdom Magdalen College, Calleva Research Centre for Evolution and Human Sciences, Oxford, United Kingdom | ilse.pit@anthro.ox.ac.uk |
| Ilker Dalgar | Ankara Medipol University, Department of Psychology, Ankara, Turkey | ilker.dalgar@ankamedipol.edu.tr |
| Ilya Zakharov | Psychological Institute of the Russian Academy of Education, Developmental Behavioral Genetics Laboratory, Moscow, Russia, Russia | iliazaharov@gmail.com |
| Azuka Ikechukwu Arinze | Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Nigeria | ikeazukaarinze@gmail.com |
| Keiko Ihaya | Fukuoka Institute of Technology, Center for Liberal Arts, Fukuoka, Japan | ihayakk@gmail.com |
| Ian D Stephen | Macquarie University, Department of Psychology, Sydney, Australia | ian.stephen@mq.edu.au |
| Biljana Gjoneska | Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Skopje, North Macedonia | biljanagjoneska@manu.edu.mk |
| Hilmar Brohmer | University of Graz, Institute of Psychology, Graz, Austria | hilmar.brohmer@uni-graz.at |
| Heather Flowe | University of Birmingham, School of Psychology, Birmingham, United Kingdom | h.flowe@bham.ac.uk |
| Hendrik Godbersen | FOM University of Applied Sciences, Essen, Germany | hendrik.godbersen@godbersen.online |
| Halil Emre Kocalar | Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Department of Psychological Counseling and Guidance, Muğla, Turkey | hemrekocalar@mu.edu.tr |
| Mattie V Hedgebeth | Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, United States | hedgebethm@vcu.edu |

| | | |
|-------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Hu Chuan-Peng | Nanjing Normal University, School of Psychology, Nanjing, China | hcp4715@gmail.com |
| MohammadHasan Sharifian | University of Tehran, Department of Psychology, Tehran, Iran | hasan.sharifian@ut.ac.ir |
| Harry Manley | Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Psychology, , Bangkok, Thailand | harrisonmanley@gmail.com |
| Handan Akkas | Ankara Science University, Business Administration Department, Ankara, Turkey | handan.akkas@hotmail.com |
| Nandor Hajdu | ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Institute of Psychology, Budapest, Hungary | hajdu.nandor93@gmail.com |
| Habiba Azab | Baylor College of Medicine, Department of Neurosurgery, Houston, United States | habiba.azab@gmail.com |
| Gwenaél Kaminski | Université de Toulouse, CLLE, CNRS, UT2J, Toulouse, France | gwenael.kaminski@univ-tlse2.fr |
| Gustav Nilsson | Karolinska Institutet, Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Solna, Sweden Stockholm University, Department of Psychology, Stockholm, Sweden | gustav.nilsson@ki.se |
| Gulnaz Anjum | University of Oslo, Department of Psychology, Oslo, Norway | gulnaz.anjum@psykologi@uio.no |
| Giovanni A Travaglino | Royal Holloway, University of London, Department of Law and Criminology, London, United Kingdom | giovanni.travaglino@rhul.ac.uk |
| Gilad Feldman | University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR | giladfel@gmail.com |
| Gerit Pfuhl | UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway | gerit.pfuhl@uit.no |
| Gabriela Czarnek | Jagiellonian University, Institute of Psychology, Krakow, Poland | gabriela.czarnek@uj.edu.pl |

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Gabriela Mariana Marcu | Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Department of Psychology, Sibiu Romania Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy Bucharest, Romania | gabriela.marcu@ulbsibiu.ro |
| Gabriela Hofer | University of Graz, Institute of Psychology, Graz, Austria | gabriela.hofer@uni-graz.at |
| Gabriel Banik | University of Presov, Institute of Psychology, Presov, Slovakia | gabriel.banik@gmail.com |
| Gabriel Agboola Adetula | Adekunle Ajasin University, Department of Pure and Applied Psychology, Faculty of Social and Management Sciences, Akungba Akoko, Nigeria | g1b2gbo3detul4@gmail.com |
| Gijsbert Bijlstra | Radboud University, Behavioural Science Institute, Nijmegen, Netherlands | g.bijlstra@bsi.ru.nl |
| Frederick Verbruggen | Ghent University, Department of Experimental Psychology, Ghent, Belgium | frederick.verbruggen@ugent.be |
| Franki Y. H. Kung | Purdue University, West Lafayette, United States | frankikung@purdue.edu |
| Frank Martela | Aalto University, Espoo, Finland | frank.martela@aalto.fi |
| Francesco Foroni | Australian Catholic University, Sydney, Australia | francesco.foroni@acu.edu.au |
| Jacques Forest | Université du Québec à Montréal, School of Management, Montreal, Canada | forest.jacques@uqam.ca |
| Gage Singer | Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Department of Psychology, Indiana, United States | gagesinger@live.com |
| Fany Muchembled | Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Monterrey, Mexico | fany.muchembled@tec.mx |

| | | |
|------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Flavio Azevedo | Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Jena, Germany | flavio.azevedo@uni-jena.de |
| Farnaz Mosannenzadeh | Radboud University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Behavioural Science Institute, Nijmegen, Netherlands | farnaz.mosannenzadeh@ru.nl |
| Evelina Marinova | Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Department of General, Experimental, Developmental, and Health Psychology, Sofia, Bulgaria | evelina.b.marinova@gmail.com |
| Eva Štrukelj | Sapienza University of Rome, Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, Rome, Italy | eva.strukelj2@gmail.com |
| Zahra Etebari | Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran | etebari.zahra@gmail.com |
| Ernest Baskin | Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, United States | ebaskin@sju.edu |
| Elkin Oswaldo Luis Garcia | Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain | eoswaldo@unav.es |
| Erica Musser | Florida International University, Department of Psychology, Center for Children and Families, Miami, United States | emusser@fiu.edu |
| I.M.M. van Steenkiste | Universiteit Leiden, Leiden, Netherlands | imvsteenkiste@gmail.com |
| Emma L. Bradshaw | Australian Catholic University, Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, Sydney, Australia | emma.bradshaw@acu.edu.au |
| El Rim Ahn | University of Florida, Department of Psychology, Gainesville, United States | elrimahn@ufl.edu |
| Eleanor Quested | Curtin University, Perth, Australia | eleanor.quested@curtin.edu.au |
| Ekaterina Pronizius | University of Vienna, Department of Cognition, Emotion, and Methods in Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Vienna, Austria | ekaterina.pronizius@univie.ac.at |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Emily A Jackson | Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, United States | ejackson@iup.edu |
| Efisio Manunta | Université de Toulouse, CLLE, CNRS, UT2J, Toulouse, France | efisio.manunta@univ-tlse2.fr |
| Elena Agadullina | HSE University, Moscow, Russia | eagadullina@hse.ru |
| Dušana Šakan | Union University, Faculty of Legal and Business Studies Dr Lazar Vrkatic, Department of Psychology, Novi Sad, Serbia | dusana.sakan@flv.edu.rs |
| Pinar Dursun | Afyon Kocatepe University, Department of Psychology, Afyonkarahisar, Turkey | dursun.pinar@gmail.com |
| Olivier Dujols | University of Grenoble Alpes, Grenoble, France | dujols.ol@gmail.com |
| Dmitrii Dubrov | HSE University, RF | ddubrov@hse.ru |
| Megan Willis | Australian Catholic University, School of Behavioural and Health Sciences, Sydney, Australia | Dr.Megan.Willis@gmail.com |
| Murat Tümer | Hacettepe University, Department of Anesthesiology and Reanimation, Ankara, Turkey | m.tumer@hacettepe.edu.tr |
| Jennifer L Beaudry | Swinburne University of Technology, Department of Psychological Sciences, Melbourne, Australia | jbeaudry@swin.edu.au |
| Dora Popović | Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, Croatia | dora.popovic@pilar.hr |
| Daniel Dunleavy | Florida State University, Center for Translational Behavioral Science, Tallahassee, United States | djd09e@fsu.edu |
| Ikhlas Djamai | Mohammed V University in Rabat, Rabat, Morocco | djamaiikhlas@gmail.com |
| Dino Krupić | The University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Osijek, Croatia | dkrupic@ffos.hr |

| | | |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Dora Herrera | Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, Lima, Peru | diherrer@pucp.pe |
| Diego Vega | Universidad Latina de Costa Rica, San Pedro, Costa Rica | luis.veгаа@ulatina.cr |
| Hongfei Du | Beijing Normal University at Zhuhai, Institute of Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, Zhuhai, China | dhfpsy@gmail.com |
| Déborа Mola | Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Instituto de Investigaciones Psicológicas ([IIPsi]CONICET y UNC), Facultad de Psicología, Córdoba, Argentina | deborа.mola@unc.edu.ar |
| Desislava Chakarova | New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria | de.chakarova@gmail.com |
| William E Davis | Wittenberg University, Department of Psychology, Springfield, United States | davisw4@wittenberg.edu |
| Dawn Liu Holford | University of Essex, Essex, United Kingdom | dawn.liuholford@gmail.com |
| David M. G. Lewis | Murdoch University, College of Science, Health, Engineering and Education, Perth, Australia Murdoch University, Centre for Healthy Ageing, Health Futures Institute, Perth, Australia, | davidlewis@utexas.edu |
| David C. Vaidis | Université de Paris, Paris, France | david.vaidis@u-paris.fr |
| Daphna Hausman Ozery | California State University, Northridge, United States | daphna.ozery@csun.edu |
| Danilo Zambrano Ricaurte | Fundación Universitaria Konrad Lorenz, Faculty of Psychology, Bogotá, Colombia | danilo.zambranor@konradlorenz.edu.co |
| Daniel Storage | University of Denver, Department of Psychology, Denver, United States | Daniel.Storage@du.edu |

| | | |
|-------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| Daniela Sousa | University of Coimbra, Institute of Nuclear Sciences Applied to Health ICNAS, Coimbra Institute for Biomedical Imaging and Translational Research CIBIT, Coimbra, Portugal | daniela.d.sousa@uc.pt |
| Daniela Serrato Alvarez | Fundación Universitaria Konrad Lorenz, Bogotá, Colombia | daniela.serratoa@konradlorenz.edu.co |
| Daniel Boller | University of St. Gallen, St. Gallen, Switzerland | daniel.boller@unisg.ch |
| Anna Dalla Rosa | University of Padova, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, Padua, Italy | anna.dallarosa@unipd.it |
| Daliborka Dimova | PSA Psihesko, Skopje, North Macedonia | daliborkadimova@gmail.com |
| Dajana Krupić | Norvel - Psychological Centre for Counselling and Research, Croatia | dajana.krupic@norvel.hr |
| Dafne Marko | University of Ljubljana, Cognitive Science, Faculty of Education, Ljubljana, Slovenia | dafne.marko@gmail.com |
| David Moreau | The University of Auckland, School of Psychology and Centre for Brain Research, Auckland, New Zealand | d.moreau@auckland.ac.nz |
| Crystal Reeck | Temple University, Fox School of Business, Philadelphia, United States | crystalreeck@gmail.com |
| Rita C Correia | University of Porto, Center for Psychology at University of Porto, Porto, Portugal | correia.rita.27@gmail.com |
| Cassie M Whitt | University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, United States | cassiewhitt9@gmail.com |
| Claus Lamm | University of Vienna, Department of Cognition, Emotion, and Methods in Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Vienna, Austria | claus.lamm@univie.ac.at |

| | | |
|-------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Claudio Singh Solorzano | Sapienza University, Department of Psychology, Rome, Italy | claudio.singh@uniroma1.it |
| Claudia C von Bastian | University of Sheffield, Department of Psychology, Sheffield, United Kingdom | c.c.vonbastian@sheffield.ac.uk |
| Clare AM Sutherland | University of Aberdeen, School of Psychology, King's College, Aberdeen, Scotland | clare.sutherland@abdn.ac.uk |
| | University of Western Australia, School of Psychological Science, Perth, Australia | |
| Clara Overkott | University of Zurich, Department of Psychology, Zurich, Switzerland | c.overkott@psychologie.uzh.ch |
| Christopher L. Aberson | Cal Poly Humboldt, Arcata, United States | cla18@humboldt.edu |
| Chunhui Wang | Chinese Center of Disease Prevention and Control, China | chunhui.wang.qdjk@gmail.com |
| Christopher P. Niemiec | University of Rochester, Rochester, United States | christopher.niemiec@rochester.edu |
| Christina Reimer | Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium | reimerc7@gmail.com |
| Christiana Karashiali | University of Cyprus, Department of Psychology, Nicosia, Cyprus | karashiali.christiana@ucy.ac.cy |
| Chris Noone | National University of Ireland, Galway, School of Psychology, Galway, Ireland | chris.noone@nuigalway.ie |
| Faith Chiu | University of Essex, Department of Language and Linguistics, Essex, United Kingdom | f.chiu@essex.ac.uk |
| Chiara Picciocchi | University of Naples L'Orientale, Naples, Italy | chiara.picciocchi@outlook.com |
| Charlotte Eben | Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium | charlotte.eben@gmx.de |
| Charlotte Brownlow | University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia | Charlotte.brownlow@usq.edu.au |

| | | |
|---------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| Cemre Karaarslan | University of Başkent, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, Ankara, Turkey | cemrekaraarslann@gmail.com |
| Nicola Cellini | University of Padua, Department of General Psychology, Department of Biomedical Sciences, Padova Neuroscience Center, and Human Inspired Technology Center, Padua, Italy | nicola.cellini@unipd.it |
| Celia Esteban-Serna | University College London, Division of Psychology & Language Sciences, London, United Kingdom | celiaestser99@gmail.com |
| Cecilia Reyna | Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (UNC), Facultad de Psicología; Instituto de Investigaciones Psicológicas (IIPsi) - Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) - UNC, Córdoba, Argentina | ceciliareyna@unc.edu.ar |
| Cecilia Ferreyra | Pontificia Universidad Católica del Peru, Lima, Peru | cecilia.ferreyra@pucp.pe |
| Carlota Batres | Franklin and Marshall College, Department of Psychology, Lancaster, United States | cbatres@fandm.edu |
| Ranran Li | Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, Amsterdam, Netherlands | ranran.li@vu.nl |
| Caterina Grano | Sapienza University, Department of Psychology, Rome, Italy | caterina.grano@uniroma1.it |
| Joelle Carpentier | Université du Québec à Montréal, School of Management, Department of Organization and Human Resources, Montreal, Canada | carpentier.joelle@uqam.ca |
| Christian K. Tamnes | University of Oslo, Department of Psychology, Oslo, Norway | c.k.tamnes@psykologi.uio.no |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Cynthia H.Y. Fu | University of East London, School of Psychology., London, United Kingdom King's College London, Centre for Affective Disorders, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, London, United Kingdom | c.fu@uel.ac.uk |
| Byurakn Ishkhanyan | Aarhus University, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus, Denmark University of Copenhagen, Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, Copenhagen, Denmark | byurakn@cc.au.dk |
| Lisa Bylinina | Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands | bylinina@gmail.com |
| Bastian Jaeger | Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, Amsterdam, Netherlands Tilburg University, Department of Social Psychology, Tilburg, Netherlands | bxjaeger@gmail.com |
| Carsten Bundt | University of Oslo, Department of Psychology, Oslo, Norway | bundt.carsten@gmail.com |
| Tara Bulut Allred | University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Laboratory for Research of Individual Differences, Belgrade, Serbia | tara.bulut@f.bg.ac.rs |
| Branko J. Vermote | Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium | branko.vermote@ugent.be |
| Ahmed Bokkour | Mohammed V University in Rabat, Rabat, Morocco | bokkour.ahmed@gmail.com |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Natalia Bogatyreva | National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia | nbogatyreva@hse.ru |
| Jiaxin Shi | The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, SAR China | langlang723@foxmail.com |
| William J Chopik | Michigan State University, Department of Psychology, East Lansing, United States | bill.chopik@gmail.com |
| Benedict Antazo | Jose Rizal University, Department of Psychology, Mandaluyong, Philippines | bgantazo@gmail.com |
| Behzad Behzadnia | University of Tabriz, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Science, Department of Motor Behavior, Tabriz, Iran | behzadniaa@gmail.com |
| Maja Becker | Université de Toulouse, CLLE, CNRS, Toulouse, France | mbecker@univ-tlse2.fr |
| Manal M. Bayyat | School of Sport Science, University of Jordan, Jordan | Mabayyat@yahoo.com |
| Beatrice Cocco | Independent Researcher | beatricecocco094@gmail.com |
| Wei-Lun Chou | Fo Guang University, Department of Psychology, Jiaoxi, Taiwan | chouweilun@ntu.edu.tw |
| Vassilis Barkoukis | Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece | bark@phed.auth.gr |
| Barbora Hubena | Independent Researcher | barbora.hubena@gmail.com |
| Barbara Žuro | The Institute of Psychology, Dublin, Ireland | barbara.zuro1@gmail.com |
| | University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Osijek, Croatia | |
| Balazs Aczel | ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Institute of Psychology, Budapest, Hungary | balazs.aczel@gmail.com |

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Ekaterina Baklanova | Lomonosov Moscow State University, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Moscow, Russia | baklanova@gmail.com |
| Hui Bai | University of Minnesota Twin Cities, Minneapolis, United States | baixx062@umn.edu |
| Busra Bahar Balci | Samsun University, Department of Psychology, Samsun, Turkey Dokuz Eylul University, Department of Psychology, Izmir, Turkey | baharbalci2@gmail.com |
| Peter Babinčák | University of Presov, Faculty of Arts, Institute and Psychology, Presov, Slovakia | peter.babincak@unipo.sk |
| Bart Soenens | Ghent University, Department of Developmental, Personality and Social Psychology | Bart.Soenens@ugent.be |
| Barnaby James Wyld Dixon | University of the Sunshine Coast, School of Health and Behavioural Sciences, Sippy Downs, Australia | bdixson@usc.edu.au |
| Aviv Mokady | Ben Gurion University, Department of Psychology, Beersheba, Israel | avmokady@gmail.com |
| Heather Barry Kappes | London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Management, London, United Kingdom | h.kappes@lse.ac.uk |
| Mohammad Atari | University of Southern California, Department of Psychology, Los Angeles, United States | atari@usc.edu |
| Anna Szala | Centre of Language Evolution Studies, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland | aszala88@gmail.com |
| Anna Szabelska | Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, Ireland | szabelska.anna@gmail.com |
| John Jamir Benzon Aruta | Department of Psychology, School of Medical and Life | aruta_johnjamirbenzon@yahoo.com |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| | Sciences, Sunway University, Malaysia | |
| Artur Domurat | Kozminski University, Centre for Economic Psychology and Decision Sciences, Warsaw, Poland | adomurat@kozminski.edu.pl |
| Nwadiogo Chisom Arinze | Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Nigeria | arinzenwadiogo@gmail.com |
| Arianna Modena | Università degli Studi di Trieste, Dipartimento di Scienze Giuridiche, del Linguaggio, dell'Interpretazione e della Traduzione, Trieste, Italy | ariannamodena95@gmail.com |
| Arca Adiguzel | Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Department of Psychological Counseling and Guidance, Muğla, Turkey | arcaadiguzel@mu.edu.tr |
| Arash Monajem | University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran | arash.monajem@hotmail.com |
| Kanza AIT EL ARABI | Mohammed V University of Rabat, Rabat, Morocco | arabikanza@gmail.com |
| Asil Ali Özdoğru | Üsküdar University, Department of Psychology, Istanbul, Turkey | asil.ozdogru@uskudar.edu.tr |
| Alex O. Rothbaum | Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, United States | aor13@case.edu |
| Adriana Julieth Olaya Torres | Universidad del Desarrollo, Faculty of Psychology, Santiago, Chile | aolayat@udd.cl |
| Andriana Theodoropoulou | University of Essex, Department of Psychology, Essex, United Kingdom | a.theodoropoulou@essex.ac.uk |
| Anna Skowronek | Independent Researcher | anna.allodola@gmail.com |
| Anita Penić Jurković | Kindergarten Kustošija, Zagreb, Croatia | anita.penic.vk@gmail.com |
| Anisha Singh | Busara Center of Behavioural Economics, Kenya | anisha.singh@busaracenter.org |
| Angelos P. Kassianos | Cyprus University of Technology , Department of Nursing, Limassol, Cyprus | angelos.kassianos@cut.ac.cy |

| | | |
|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| | University College London, Department of Applied Health Research, London, United Kingdom | |
| Andrej Findor | Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia | andrej.findor@fses.uniba.sk |
| Andree Hartanto | Singapore Management University, School of Social Sciences, Singapore | andreeh@smu.edu.sg |
| Anais Thibault Landry | Concordia University, John Molson Business School, Montreal, Canada | Anais.thibaultlandry@gmail.com |
| Ana Ferreira | University of Coimbra, Faculty of Medicine FMUC, Institute of Nuclear Sciences Applied to Health ICNAS, Coimbra Institute for Biomedical Imaging and Translational Research CIBIT , Coimbra, Portugal | apferreira@icnas.uc.pt |
| Anabela Caetano Santos | University of Lisbon, Aventura Social and DESSH, Faculty of Human Kinetics, Lisbon, Portugal University of Lisbon, Institute of Environmental Health, Medicine Faculty, Lisbon, Portugal | anabelasantos@campus.ul.pt |
| | ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, CIS-IUL, Lisbon, Portugal | |
| Anabel De la Rosa- Gomez | National Autonomous University of Mexico, Faculty of Higher Studies Iztacala, Mexico City, Mexico | anabel.delarosa@iztacala.unam.mx |
| Amélie Gourdon- Kanhukamwe | Kingston University, London, United Kingdom | amelie.gourdon-kanhukamwe@kcl.ac.uk |
| | King's College London, London, United Kingdom | |
| | Institute for Globally Distributed Open Research and Education (IGDORE), United Kingdom | |

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Alexandria M. Luxon | Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, United States | aluxon@hawk.iit.edu |
| Anna Louise Todsén | University of St Andrews, Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, St Andrews, United Kingdom | alt8@st-andrews.ac.uk |
| Alper Karababa | Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Department of Psychological Counselling and Guidance, Faculty of Education, Muğla, Turkey | alperkarababa@mu.edu.tr |
| Allison Janak | New York University, Steinhardt, Department of Applied Psychology, New York, United States | apj263@nyu.edu |
| Alice Pilato | University of Trieste, Department of Translation and Interpretation, Trieste, Italy | alicepilato98@gmail.com |
| Alexandre Bran | Université de Paris, Paris, France | alexandre.bran@outlook.com |
| Alexa M Tullett | University of Alabama, Department of Psychology, Tuscaloosa, United States | alexa.tullett@gmail.com |
| Anna O. Kuzminska | University of Warsaw, Faculty of Management, Warsaw, Poland | akuzminska@wz.uw.edu.pl |
| Anthony J Krafnick | Dominican University, Department of Psychology, River Forest, United States | akrafnick@dom.edu |
| Anum Urooj | La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia | ain.sonia@gmail.com |
| Ahmed Khaoudi | Mohammed V University in Rabat, Rabat, Morocco | ahmedkhaoudi@gmail.com |
| Afroja Ahmed | University of Limerick, Global MINDS, Department of Psychology, Limerick, Ireland | 19283237@studentmail.ul.ie |
| Agata Groyecka- Bernard | University of Wrocław, Institute of Psychology, Wrocław, Poland | agata.groyecka@gmail.com |

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Adrian Dahl Askelund | Nic Waals Institute, Lovisenberg Diaconal Hospital, Oslo, Norway | adrian.askelund@gmail.com |
| Adeyemi Adetula | Université Grenoble Alpes, LIP/PC2S, Grenoble, France Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Department of Psychology, Ndufu- Alike, Nigeria | adeyemiadetula1@gmail.com |
| Anabel Belaus | Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Instituto de Investigaciones Psicológicas (IIPsi) Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Córdoba, Argentina | abelaus@unc.edu.ar |
| Abdelilah Ca Charyate | Ibn Tofail University, Higher College of Education & Training Kenitra, Morocco | abdelilah.charyate@uit.ac.ma |
| Aaron L. Wichman | Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, United States | aaron.wichman@wku.edu |
| Alina Stoyanova | Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Department of General, Experimental, Developmental, and Health Psychology, Sofia, Bulgaria | a.svilenova@gmail.com |
| Anna Greenburgh | University College London, Department of Experimental Psychology, London, United Kingdom | a.greenburgh@ucl.ac.uk |
| Andrew G. Thomas | Swansea University, Psychology Department, Swansea, United Kingdom | research@agthomas.net |
| Alexios Arvanitis | University of Crete, Department of Psychology, Rethymno, Greece | a.arvanitis@uoc.gr |
| Patrick S Forscher | Université Grenoble Alpes, LIP/PC2S, Grenoble, France Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, Nairobi, Kenya | schnarrd@gmail.com |

| | | |
|-------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Peter R Mallik | Ashland University, Department of Psychology, Ashland, United States | pmallik@ashland.edu |
| Maximilian A. Primbs | Radboud University, Behavioural Science Institute, Nijmegen, Netherlands | maximilian.primbs@gmx.de |
| Jeremy K. Miller | Willamette University, Department of Psychology, Salem, United States | millerj@willamette.edu |
| Hannah Moshontz | University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of Psychology, Madison, United States | hmoshontz@gmail.com |
| Heather L. Urry | Tufts University, Department of Psychology, Medford, United States | heather.urry@tufts.edu |
| Hans IJzerman | Université Grenoble Alpes, LIP/PC2S, Grenoble, France Institut Universitaire de France, Paris, France | h.ijzerman@gmail.com |
| Dana M. Basnight-Brown | United States International University - Africa, Nairobi, Kenya | dana.basnightbrown@usiu.ac.ke |
| Christopher R. Chartier | Ashland University, Department of Psychology, Ashland, United States | cchartie@ashland.edu |
| Erin M. Buchanan | Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, Harrisburg, United States | ebuchanan@harrisburgu.edu |
| Nicholas A. Coles | Harvard University, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, United States Stanford University, Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford, United States | ncoles@stanford.edu |

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic (and its aftermath) highlights a critical need to communicate health information effectively to the global public. Given that subtle differences in information framing can have meaningful effects on behavior, behavioral science research highlights a pressing question: Is it more effective to frame COVID-19 health messages in terms of potential losses (e.g., “If you do not practice these steps, you can endanger yourself and others”) or potential gains (e.g., “If you practice these steps, you can protect yourself and others”)? Collecting data in 48 languages from 15,929 participants in 84 countries, we experimentally tested the effects of message framing on COVID-19-related judgments, intentions, and feelings. Loss- (vs. gain-) framed messages increased self-reported anxiety among participants cross-nationally with little-to-no impact on policy attitudes, behavioral intentions, or information seeking relevant to pandemic risks. These results were consistent across 84 countries, three variations of the message framing wording, and 560 data processing and analytic choices. Thus, results provide an empirical answer to a global communication question and highlight the emotional toll of loss-framed messages. Critically, this work demonstrates the importance of considering unintended affective consequences when evaluating nudge-style interventions.

Keywords: Message framing, Anxiety, Nudges, COVID-19

Declarations

Funding

Due to the large-scale nature of the collaboration (over 500 co-authors), all funding sources are listed in a separate document.

Conflicts of interest/competing interests

We have no conflicts of interests/competing interests to report.

Availability of data and material

Data and materials are available here: <https://osf.io/m6q8f/>

Code availability

Code is available here: <https://osf.io/m6q8f/>

Authors' contributions

Due to the large-scale nature of the collaboration (over 500 co-authors), the author contributions are listed in a separate document.

Ethics approval

All participating research groups either obtained approval from their host institution's ethics committee, explicitly indicated that their institution did not require approval to conduct this type of experiment, or explicitly indicated that the experiment was covered by a preexisting ethics approval.

Consent to participate

All participants provided informed consent.

Introduction

Managing the COVID-19 pandemic (and its aftermath) hinges in part on effectively communicating health messages to the global public. One critical question is how to frame such messages, given widespread evidence from psychology and related fields that the way in which information is framed can have meaningful effects on behavior, even when the core information is essentially the same across distinct frames (for reviews, see Gallagher & Updegraff, 2012; Rothman, Desmarais, & Lenne, 2020). Indeed, in their widely-cited review recommending social and behavioral science applications for reducing the spread of COVID-19, Van Bavel and colleagues (2020) highlighted this very question: “Research is needed to determine whether a more positive [vs. negative] frame could educate the public and relieve negative emotions while increasing public health behaviors” (p. 462). More generally, Sunstein and Thaler (2003, p. 1182) have long argued that “In order to be effective, any effort to inform people must be rooted in an understanding of how people actually think. Presentation makes a great deal of difference: The behavioral consequences of otherwise identical pieces of information depend on how they are framed.” In their view, framing constitutes a potentially powerful nudge—i.e., a way of altering people’s behavior in a predictable way without changing the underlying incentives (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009; see also de Bruin & Bostrom, 2012; Downs, 2014).

In the case of COVID-19 health messaging, communicators could emphasize either (a) the benefits of compliance (i.e., *gain framing*) or (b) the costs of non-compliance (i.e., *loss framing*) with recommended actions. For example, as depicted in Figure 1, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website (perhaps unintentionally) framed messages in terms of gains, asking the public to: “Wear a mask. Save lives” (CDC, 2021).

However, an alternative loss framing might have said: “If you do not wear a mask, lives may be lost.”

Given the ability of news media, national and international health organizations, and political leaders to reach wide audiences, message framing effects could save a substantial number of lives with limited implementation costs. With this possibility in mind, we conducted an experiment to test the effect of loss- versus gain- framing of COVID-19-related public health messages on behavioral intentions, policy attitudes, and information seeking among participants in 84 countries during the pandemic. Moreover, we sought to assess the potential benefit of changes on those outcomes against the potential emotional costs that loss (vs. gain) framing might elicit.¹ Prior studies suggest that loss frames (versus gain frames) are associated with relatively more global negative than positive affect (Nabi et al., 2020; Gosling, Caparos, & Moutier, 2020). Here, we chose to examine whether loss (versus gain) framing would increase participants’ anxiety, in particular, given that framing effects on anxiety have received little to no empirical attention and that anxiety has the potential to trigger significant health burdens.

Anxiety, “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure” (American Psychological Association, 2021), may take the form of a temporary state, a chronic trait-like tendency, or a clinical disorder.² Anxiety has been linked with leading causes of human morbidity and mortality. For example, heightened

¹ Although behavioral decision researchers studying loss vs. gain framing have traditionally examined emotional states to understand their influence on behaviors and attitudes (for reviews, Dorison, Klusowski, Han, & Lerner, 2020; Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, & Kassam, 2015), they have tended to omit emotion as an outcome in nudge-style interventions (i.e., interventions that encourage desirable behavior without restricting choice or introducing economic incentives; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). For counter-examples, see Allcott & Kessler, 2019; Loewenstein & O’Donoghue, 2006; Zlatev & Rogers, 2020.

² Anxiety disorders are ranked as the sixth largest contributor to non-fatal health loss globally and appear in the top 10 causes of years of healthy life lost in all WHO Regions (World Health Organization, 2021). We chose anxiety not only because it was a focal emotional state heightened by the pandemic (Aknin et al., 2021), but also because of its association with negative downstream consequences for coping and for overall health.

anxiety is linked to increased risk of cardiovascular disease mortality and morbidity (e.g., heart disease, stroke, and heart failure; Levine et al., 2021). It has also been linked to increased reactivity to losses (Hartley & Phelps, 2012; Xu et al., 2013) and increased stress hormone secretion (i.e., cortisol), which, when chronic, diminishes immune function and complicates individuals' ability to cope with stress (for review, Taylor, 2021). Moreover, the effect of anxiety on stress hormone secretion may worsen with age (Ó Hartaigh et al., 2012; Otte et al., 2005), potentially putting elderly individuals who already face heightened risks from COVID-19 in an even more vulnerable position. While the anxiety triggered by exposure to public health messages is likely mild compared to the levels associated with a clinical disorder, any potential behavioral benefit from message framing must still be weighed against a potential emotional cost (intended or otherwise).

Given the global nature of the pandemic, it is critical to assess the generalizability of message framing effects on a global scale. Traditionally, psychological research on human behavior includes sample populations in western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies (i.e., WEIRD societies; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010a, 2010b). However, extrapolating from studies conducted in only a single location may miss meaningful cross-regional variation in effects. Consequently, this can lead to incomplete--and even potentially detrimental--policy recommendations. Thus, rather than assume generalization from a single population, research that aims to inform global policy recommendations during COVID-19 should incorporate a global sample (c.f., Bauer, 2019).

Method

We launched a global participant recruitment effort between April and September 2020, collecting data in 48 languages from 15,929 participants in 84 countries.³ Participants were recruited by (1) research groups affiliated with the Psychological Science Accelerator (PSA; Moshontz et al., 2018) and (2) semi-representative research panels. The present experiment was bundled with another experiment—also conducted in collaboration with the PSA, but led by an independent research group—that assessed the relative effects of autonomy-supportive messages vs. controlling messages on motivation and behavioral intentions relevant to COVID-19. Participants completed both experiments in a randomized order after completing a pre-study survey that included demographic questions (for full wording of all questions from the pre-study survey and relevant descriptive statistics, see Table 1). The order of the study (first vs. second) did not have a main effect on any of the dependent variables, although there was one higher-order interaction with self-reported anxiety (described below). A third experiment investigated the effect of cognitive reappraisal, an emotion regulation strategy, and was conducted concurrently by the PSA with a different sample of participants (Wang et al., 2021).

In the present experiment, participants were randomly assigned to read COVID-19 health recommendations adapted from World Health Organization (WHO) advisories (e.g., social distancing, mask wearing) that were framed in terms of losses (e.g., “if you do not practice these four steps, you can endanger yourself and others”) or gains (e.g., “if you practice these four steps, you can protect yourself and others”). To ensure that any observed effects arose from meaningful conceptual differences (as opposed to particular wording; see Wells & Windschitl, 1999), we also examined three variations of the framed messages (described below). These variations of the framed messages were designed to assess generalizability of loss vs. gain

³ For country classification, we relied on standards promoted by the International Organization for Standardization. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the presence of ongoing territory disputes that are not reflected in these standards.

framing across different wordings. As such, the differences in wording are relatively minor compared to the more central manipulation of loss vs. gain framing. Thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of six between-subjects experimental conditions that varied both the framing and wording/version of the COVID-19 health recommendation.

Following the message framing manipulation, we measured four outcome variables: (1) behavioral intentions to follow guidelines to prevent COVID-19 transmission, (2) attitudes toward COVID-19 prevention policies, (3) whether participants chose to seek more information about COVID-19, and (4) self-reported anxiety. Seeking to create conditions under which one might detect any systematic effect of framing, we selected scale responses concerning behavioral intentions and information seeking as outcome variables. We selected attitudes toward COVID-19 prevention policies because garnering citizen support for public policies is a critical ingredient in successfully combating the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we measured self-reported anxiety to assess the extent to which message framing may trigger unintended affective consequences, beyond traditional behavioral or policy outcomes.

Psychological Science Accelerator (PSA) COVID-19 Rapid Project

We conducted the present experiment as part of a larger PSA COVID-19 Rapid Project, which involved one pre-study general survey and three experiments related to COVID-19 (Forscher, Paris, Primbs, & Coles, 2020). The study and the experiments were presented online through the *formR* survey platform (Arslan, Walther, & Tata, 2020). The present experiment was bundled with another experiment, both of which participants completed in random order after completing the pre-study general survey that included questions about beliefs and behaviors related to COVID-19.

Participants

Sample size was primarily determined by the availability of resources amongst members of the PSA. Nevertheless, results from an a-priori power simulation estimating power as a function of number of countries, number of participants per country, intraclass correlations, effect sizes, and between-country variability in effect sizes can be found at <https://osf.io/m6q8f/>. After excluding data from participants who (a) had corrupted data due to technical difficulties, (b) did not provide responses to our outcomes of interest, or (c) did not indicate their country of origin, we were left with data from 15,929 participants (59% female, 36% male, 4% non-response, < 1% other; $M_{\text{age}} = 33.70$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.45$), who lived in 84 different countries and completed the survey in a total of 48 languages. Participants were recruited either through semi-representative research panels ($n = 5,555$) or by PSA research groups ($n = 10,374$; see Forscher, Paris, Primbs, & Coles, 2020, for more details on sampling and translations). The survey was conducted during the Spring and Summer of 2020.

Procedure

Independent variables. Participants were randomly assigned to view loss- or gain-framed versions of four recommendations related to COVID-19 adapted from the WHO in Spring 2020. These recommendations related to: (1) staying home (unless absolutely necessary), (2) avoiding all shops other than necessary ones (such as for food), (3) wearing a mouth and nose covering in public at all times, and (4) completely isolating if exposed to COVID-19. All participants viewed four similarly-worded recommendations—but were randomly assigned to view either a loss- or gain-framed message. To examine whether our conclusions generalize across multiple variants of framed messages, we created three different versions of each frame (see Wells & Windschitl, 1999, for more information on the importance of this stimulus sampling approach). Thus, the experiment took the form of a 2 (Framing: gain, loss) x 3

(Version: Version 1, Version 2, Version 3) between-subjects factorial design, featuring the following messages:

- *Gain/Version 1*: “There is so much to gain. If you practice these four steps, you can protect yourself and others.”
- *Gain/Version 2*: “You have so much to gain. You can protect yourself and others if you practice these four steps.”
- *Gain/Version 3*: “There is so much to gain. Practicing these four steps can help you stay healthy and protect the health of others.”
- *Loss/Version 1*: “There is so much to lose. If you do not practice these four steps, you can endanger yourself and others.”
- *Loss/Version 2*: “You have so much to lose. You can endanger yourself and others if you do not practice these four steps.”
- *Loss/Version 3*: “There is so much to lose. You can get sick and endanger the health of others if you do not practice these four steps.”

The four recommendations and dependent variables were displayed for all participants, with the message frame and version type varied by condition. The manipulated message appeared at the top of the pages displaying each recommendation and instructions when completing the outcome variables.

Manipulation check. At the end of the survey, participants completed a manipulation check. We asked participants which of the following phrases, if any, they recalled reading during the survey: (a) There is so much to gain. You can stay healthy and protect others by...; (b) There is so much to lose. You can avoid losing your health and avoid endangering others by...”; or (c) neither. Exact wording varied to match the precise wording across the six conditions.

Dependent variables. After reading the four recommendations (with message framing varied by condition), participants completed three self-report questionnaires: behavioral intentions to follow guidelines to prevent COVID-19 transmission, attitudes toward COVID-19 prevention policies, and self-reported anxiety (described below). Afterwards, participants completed a behavioral measure, wherein they indicated whether they would be interested in learning more information about safe practices regarding COVID-19 (and were thus directed to the WHO website). Full wording of all items are presented in Table 2. While the questions themselves were identical across conditions, participants received different instructions depending on their randomly-assigned condition. For example, for the behavioral intention questionnaire, participants in the gain/version 1 condition saw: “Stay healthy and protect others. There is so much to gain. We are interested in how you yourself will respond in the coming week in order to stay healthy and protect others.” Participants in the loss/version 1 condition saw: “Avoid losing your health and avoid endangering others. We are interested in how you yourself will respond in the coming week in order to avoid losing your health and avoid endangering others.” The presentation order of the dependent variables was held constant for all participants.

For the outcome variables, we created ad-hoc face-valid measures and relied on exploratory analyses to assess internal consistency and convergent validity (see *Results* and *Supplementary Information (SI)*).⁴ Participants first indicated their intentions to engage in a variety of COVID-19 preventative behaviors (adapted from WHO recommendations at the time of survey launch in Spring 2020). Specifically, participants indicated how likely they were to: (1) stay at home at all times unless absolutely necessary, (2) avoid all shops other than necessary

⁴ Unfortunately, due to the time pressure to launch this international data collection effort at the onset of the global pandemic, we did not have time to pretest the stimuli for the study.

ones (such as for food), (3) wear a mouth and nose covering (such as a mask) in public at all times, and (4) completely isolate themselves if they think they have been exposed to COVID-19. The four questions were presented in a randomized order and all responses were on a 7-point scale (1 = Extremely unlikely to 7 = Extremely likely).

Of note, we observed an unexpected J-shaped distribution in behavioral intentions—wherein a large majority of participants indicated very strong intentions to engage in protective behaviors ($M = 6.47$, $SD = 0.91$ on a 7-point scale). In the *SI*, we discuss potential explanations for, and additional analyses regarding, the restriction of range. Despite the restriction of range (and thus smaller-than-expected variation in the measure), behavioral intentions were still correlated with other variables in the convergent validity analyses (r s from .04 - .35; described in *Results* below). Furthermore, we did not observe a restriction of range in the other continuous outcomes: attitudes about policies that empower individuals ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.93$ on a 7-point scale), attitudes about policies that extend government power ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.31$ on a 7-point scale), and anxiety ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.17$ on a 5-point scale). Concerns about restrictions of range also were not applicable to the measure of information seeking (25% no, 75% yes).

After responding to the behavioral intention items, participants reported their attitudes toward five statements regarding COVID-19 prevention policies. The policy attitude items focused on trade-offs between individual rights and collective security. Two statements emphasized individual rights and autonomy (e.g., “Individuals, not governments, should decide how best to act during the COVID-19 pandemic”), whereas the other three statements emphasized collective security (e.g., “Government health officials should do everything in their power to address the spread of COVID-19, even if it severely limits daily activities for citizens”).

The five questions were presented in a randomized order and all responses were on a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree).

Next, the survey asked participants to indicate the extent to which they felt anxious, afraid, and fearful when considering the COVID-19 health recommendations. The three questions were presented in a randomized order and all responses were on 5-point scales (1 = Not at all to 5 = Extremely).

Last, participants were asked if they would like to learn more information about COVID-19. (All participants, regardless of stated preference, received additional information about COVID-19 at the end of the study.) A one-item question asked participants: “At the end of the study today, would you like to learn the latest reliable information about COVID-19?” The dependent variable was assessed as a binary variable (Yes, No).

Ethics

All participating research groups either obtained approval from their host institution’s ethics committee, indicated that their institution did not require approval to conduct this type of experiment, or indicated that the experiment was covered by a preexisting ethics approval. All participants provided informed consent.

Results

First, we report a set of preliminary analyses concerning the manipulation check, internal consistency of scales, and convergent validity among variables. Next, we report the results of our inferential analyses. Finally, we report additional exploratory analyses regarding anxiety. Data, code, materials, power simulation details, and the pre-registered analysis plan for this experiment are available at <https://osf.io/m6q8f/>.

Preliminary Analyses

Manipulation check. Results revealed that 73% of participants correctly identified their condition from among three different response options (gain message, loss message, or neither). In order to be conservative, and to keep with our pre-registration plan, we reported results with the full (Intent to Treat) sample even though 27% of participants did not correctly identify which treatment they received. Importantly, however, the pattern of results was similar when we restricted the sample to just the portion of the sample that passed the manipulation check (see *SI* for more information).

Internal consistency of outcome measures. Internal consistency for both the four-item behavioral intention and three-item self-reported anxiety measures was appropriate ($\alpha > .78$, average inter-item $r > .47$). The internal consistency of the five-item policy support measure, however, was lower than expected ($\alpha = .67$; average inter-item $r = .29$). Thus, per our pre-registration plan, we performed an exploratory factor analysis. This exploratory factor analysis used varimax rotation and a minimal residual factoring method to identify two distinct subgroups of items: support for (1) policies that empower individuals to make decisions about COVID-19 (two items; $\alpha = .74$; average inter-item $r = .59$), and (2) policies that extend governments' ability to stop the spread of COVID-19 (three items; $\alpha = .77$; average inter-item $r = .53$). These two scales were weakly and negatively correlated ($r = -.15, p < .001$), and we analyzed the two subscales separately. Our behavioral measure of information-seeking was a single item and thus internal consistency analyses are not applicable.

Convergent validity of outcome variables. We examined the extent to which our outcome measures were associated with conceptually-related variables. To do so, we (a) post-hoc identified conceptually-related variables from the pre-study general survey, and (b) examined the extent to which they were associated with the outcome variables. Notably, these general survey

items were administered before the present study (and thus were not affected by participants' experience in the study). In all cases, we observed associations in the anticipated direction ($p < .001$) that ranged from very small ($|r| = .04$) to medium ($|r| = .35$) in size. For example, behavioral intentions were positively associated with the self-reported number of times that participants had recently worn a mask ($r = .28, p < .001$; see *SI* for more detail).

Inferential Analyses

We first modeled each outcome variable using linear (for continuous variables) or logistic (for dichotomized variables) mixed-effects regression with message framing entered as an effect-coded factor, country-level random intercepts, and country-level random slopes. For all outcomes besides behavioral intentions, country-level random slopes led to singular fits and were subsequently removed. These convergence issues provided preliminary evidence that the estimated effects of message framing on our outcomes of interest were consistent across countries. To facilitate comparisons across outcomes, we also estimated the overall message framing effects using random-effects meta-analysis. For the meta-analysis, we used Cohen's d as the effect size index, wherein positive values indicated higher levels of the outcome variables in the loss- (vs. gain-) framed conditions.⁵

Effects on behavioral intentions, policy support, and information seeking. Our first set of analyses tested the effect of message framing on behavioral intentions, attitudes towards two types of policies, and information seeking. Results indicated that framing messages in terms of losses vs. gains had extremely small, non-significant effects on: (1) intentions to engage in protective behavior (a 0.03 increase on a 7-point scale; $F(1, 35.17) = 2.70, p = .110, d = 0.03$,

⁵ For dichotomous outcomes (i.e., information seeking), we converted log odds ratios to Cohen's d s (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009). Countries without at least one observation in each of the conditions were excluded from the meta-analysis.

95% CI [-0.01, 0.07], $\tau^2 = 0.005$); (2) support for policies that empower individuals to make decisions about COVID-19 (a 0.01 increase on a 7-point scale; $F(1, 15871) = 0.05$, $p = .826$, $d = 0.004$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.04], $\tau^2 \approx 0$); (3) support for policies that extend governments' ability to stop the spread of COVID-19 (a 0.04 increase on a 7-point scale; $F(1, 15877) = 3.46$, $p = .063$, $d = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.002, 0.06], $\tau^2 \approx 0$); and (4) the probability that participants sought additional information about COVID-19 (a 1.2% point decrease; $z = -1.80$, $p = .071$, $d = -0.008$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.004], $\tau^2 \approx 0$). Notably, the low τ^2 values suggest that the estimated effects of message framing on our outcomes of interest were consistent across countries (see Figure 2).

While we found little evidence of between-country heterogeneity in the effects of message framing on behavioral intentions, attitudes, and information seeking, we next examined whether these estimated effects were moderated by methodological features of the study, such as: (a) the version of the framed message (versions 1-3), (b) the sampling pool (panel, non-panel), and (c) the order in which participants completed the two bundled studies (present experiment first, present experiment second). To do so, we separately added each moderator-of-interest and its higher-order interaction with message framing as effect-coded factors in the mixed-effects models described above. Results did not indicate that the message framing effects interacted with any of the moderators of interest ($ps > .138$).

To probe the robustness of the estimated effects of message framing on behavioral intentions, attitudes, and information seeking, we performed exploratory *multiverse analyses* (also sometimes described as a specification-curve analysis; Simonsohn, Simmons, & Nelson, 2020; Steegen, Tuerlinckx, Gelman, & Vanpaemel, 2016).⁶ The present multiverse analyses

⁶ Such multiverse analyses acknowledge that (1) there are often many justifiable approaches to processing and modeling data, (2) justifiable differences in the processing and modeling of data can change the inferences one might draw from the data, (3) examining different data processing and modeling approaches helps probe the

examined how 398 justifiable approaches to data processing and modeling affected our conclusions. Most approaches indicated that message framing did not impact intentions to engage in protective behavior (87% of models) or support for COVID-19-related policies (67% of models). In the scenarios where the estimated message framing effects were significant, the magnitudes were extremely small (i.e., less than a 0.06 change on a 7-point behavioral intentions measure; less than a 0.20 change in a 7-point policy support measure). Many justifiable data processing and analysis approaches did indicate that framing messages in terms of losses (vs. gains) decreased information seeking (80% of models). However, in these scenarios, the magnitude was small (i.e., less than a 4% point decrease in the probability of seeking information; see *SI* for more information).

Effects on self-reported anxiety. The next set of analyses examined whether loss-framed vs. gain-framed messages had a differential impact on self-reported anxiety. Results indicated that participants reported higher levels of anxiety after being exposed to loss- ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.18$) vs. gain-framed ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.14$) messages, $F(1, 15881) = 253.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.29], $\tau^2 = 0.007$. Once again, the low τ^2 value suggests that the estimated effect of message framing on anxiety was consistent across countries (see Figure 2).

To assess these anxiety results in terms of practical perspective, we estimated the association between (a) self-reported personal exposure to COVID-19 (a presumably anxiety-producing event that was measured as a binary variable in the pre-study survey), and (b) experienced anxiety after the framing manipulation. The estimated effect of message framing on

robustness of a set of results, and (4) reporting how different data processing and modeling approaches impact results can improve the transparency and credibility of research findings (Lebel et al., 2018). In the main text, we describe the results of multiverse analysis models that converged. Nevertheless, we describe the results of additional analytic approaches that yielded model convergence issues in the *SI*.

anxiety was nearly 1.5 times the size of the estimated association between actual exposure to COVID-19 and anxiety (which was associated with a 0.20 increase on the 5-point anxiety measure). Thus, in practical terms, the effect of message framing on anxiety appeared substantial. That being said, comparing the size of these relationships could be complicated by the fact that people who were exposed to COVID-19 and avoided negative outcomes could have decreased (rather than increased) anxiety.⁷ Future research is needed to further benchmark the relative size of loss- vs. gain-framing on self-reported anxiety.

Similar to the analyses of the other outcome variables, we next examined whether the estimated effect of framing on anxiety was moderated by methodological features of the study. Results did not indicate that the effect of message framing on anxiety was moderated by the version of the message ($p = .368$) or the sampling pool ($p = .799$). This implies that the underlying construct itself (loss vs. gain framing), rather than the particular wording associated with any instantiation of it, drives the effects. Inconsequentially, the message framing effect was moderated by the order in which participants completed the study, $F(1, 15880) = 4.35, p = .037$. Follow-up contrasts indicated that the effect of framing on anxiety was slightly larger when participants completed our study second (where message framing led to a 0.32 shift on the 5-point anxiety measure) vs. first (where message framing led to a 0.24 shift in the anxiety measure). It could be the case that completing the other study first (which also asked participants to read COVID-19 health messaging) heightened attention to COVID-19, and thus magnified the anxiety effects observed in the present data. Importantly, however, the observed effect of message framing on anxiety was significant regardless of the order of the studies (both $ps <$

⁷ We thank the review team for this point.

.0001) and the moderation by study order was relatively inconsequential in size compared to the overall effect of loss- vs. gain-framing.

Finally, we conducted a multiverse analysis to examine how 162 justifiable approaches to data processing and modeling affected our conclusions about anxiety. Strikingly, *all* 162 justifiable data processing and modeling approaches examined in the multiverse analysis indicated that framing messages in terms of losses (vs. gains) significantly increased anxiety (all $ps < .001$; all mean differences > 0.21). These results suggest that the inferences regarding the effects of message framing on anxiety are robust across a wide variety of justifiable analytic decisions.

Additional analyses regarding pre-study worry

Our analyses to this point have examined anxiety in response to the framed messages. However, the pre-study survey also included two items assessing anxiety-relevant states: worry regarding one's physical and emotional health. Both items were moderately correlated ($r = .58$) and answered on 5-point scales (1 = Not at all worried, 5 = Extremely worried). For simplicity, we averaged the two items and refer to this combined index as pre-study worry. (Statistical significance of results remains unchanged when we analyze the two items separately.)

In order to be maximally comprehensive, we conducted a set of exploratory (post-hoc) analyses concerning whether loss (vs. gain) framing would exert differential effects on any of the four outcome variables for individuals higher (vs. lower) on pre-study worry. That is, we tested whether pre-study worry moderated any of the message framing effects documented above. To test this possibility, we modeled each outcome variable with (a) frame entered as an effect-coded factor, (b) pre-study worry entered mean-centered, (c) their higher-order interaction, and (d) random intercepts for country. For behavioral intentions, policy support, and post-study anxiety,

we used linear mixed-effect models; for information seeking, we used a logistic mixed-effect model. For all outcomes, there was not a significant interaction between message framing and pre-study worry ($p > .43$), suggesting that the effect of message framing did not depend on levels of pre-study worry.

Summary. While framing messages in terms of loss (versus gain) conferred little-to-no measured benefits, such loss framing exerted moderately-sized and extremely consistent costs in terms of increased state anxiety (see Figure 2). Moreover, the results for anxiety appeared consistent across countries, message wording, sampling pool, study order, and analytic choices—increasing confidence about generalizability.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic (and its aftermath) highlights a critical need to effectively communicate health information to the global public. It also highlights the importance of rapidly testing psychological interventions on a global scale. We experimentally tested the differential effects of framing messages in terms of losses vs. gains on COVID-19-related behavioral intentions, policy attitudes, information seeking, and experienced anxiety.

Results indicated that message framing had little-to-no measurable benefit for behavioral intentions, policy attitudes, or information seeking, but did have a significant emotional cost in terms of increased anxiety. These results were consistent across 84 countries, three variations of the message framing wording, across semi-representative and non-representative samples, across survey order, and across 560 data processing and analytic choices. Taken together, these results imply that the conceptual difference between loss- and gain-framing accounts for its effect on anxiety (rather than any particular phrasing of stimuli, culturally specific connotation, methodological feature, or data analytic approach).

The effect of message framing on anxiety when reading loss- vs. gain-framed health recommendations was nearly 1.5 times the size of the association between self-reported personal exposure to COVID-19 and anxiety when reading the health messages, revealing the important practical impact of loss framing. Because heightened anxiety has been associated with major causes of morbidity and mortality, diminished coping abilities, and neuroendocrine dysregulation, the heightened levels of anxiety under loss-framed messages represent an important outcome. Of course, the anxiety triggered in our study was relatively mild compared to acute levels associated with clinically-diagnosable anxiety disorders. Indeed, the average post-treatment anxiety was quite low in both framing conditions (2.58/5 and 2.30/5 for the loss and gain conditions, respectively). Nevertheless, public health communicators should benefit from learning that gain-framed COVID-19 messages are at least as effective as loss-framed messages in their impact on behavioral intentions, policy attitudes, and information seeking behavior--but induce significantly less anxiety at a population level.

While some commentators have urged organizations to “scare people” when communicating COVID-19 health information (e.g., in the *New York Times*; Rosenthal, 2020), the present results cast doubt on the wisdom of reminding people how much they stand to lose during the pandemic. Despite eliciting higher levels of anxiety, loss-framed (vs. gain-framed) messages did not meaningfully change behavioral intentions, information seeking behavior, or policy attitudes in the context of COVID-19. Admittedly, literature on fear appeals is nuanced (e.g., Kok et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2018). But because the present study is the largest and most globally-representative study ever conducted on message framing and anxiety, there is compelling evidence that triggering anxiety through COVID-19 messaging does not improve behavioral intentions, attitudes, or actual behavior—at least in this context.

More generally, the present results contribute to a nascent literature broadening the scope of behavioral decision (nudge-style) interventions beyond strictly behavioral outcomes. Fields such as public health and health psychology have long considered affective states to be crucial outcome variables in and of themselves (e.g., Epel et al., 2018; Mikels et al., 2016; Taylor, 2021). The field of communication has also begun to consider affect as both an outcome itself and as a mediator of behavioral outcomes (Hameleers, 2021; Wong, Harvell & Harrison, 2013; Nabi et al, 2020). In the present work, we build both on these fields, and on emerging literature in behavioral decision research (Allcott & Kessler, 2019; Haushofer, Mudida, & Shapiro, 2021; Zlatev & Rogers, 2020), to propose that emotional consequences should be considered when evaluating the costs vs. benefits of nudge-style interventions (c.f., Glaeser, 2005).⁸ In the present case, under an expanded cost-benefit analysis that includes emotional consequences (c.f. Dukes et al., 2021), messages framed in terms of gains appear superior (for related discussion, see Loewenstein & O'Donoghue, 2006).

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its global scope, the present experiment features some methodological limitations. First, it remains unknown whether sustained framing interventions (rather than single shot) could have stronger effects. Given that the measures rely on self-report and that the anxiety effects are measured immediately (rather than over time), it is unclear to what extent such effects would persist outside of the specific experimental context. Second, the behavioral intentions variable exhibited restriction of range, which may have contributed to diminishing a message framing effect. However, behavioral intentions had sufficient variance to correlate with other expected predictors in the study (e.g., self-reported mask wearing), providing some evidence that

⁸ This idea is not new. Economist Jeremy Bentham's original (1879) conception of utility emphasized happiness as "the greatest good" (for discussion, see Lerner, Dorison, & Klusowski, 2022).

the range was not sufficiently limited to preclude the detection of meaningful relationships. Moreover, we did not observe restrictions of range on policy attitudes and information seeking (variables that we similarly did not find affected by message framing).

A few future directions merit note. Most centrally, future research is needed to understand the lack of differential effects of loss vs. gain message framing on behavioral intentions, policy support, and information seeking. Perhaps the strongest explanation for why loss-gain framing shows substantial effects in other contexts—but not here—is because the present set-up differs substantially from classic loss-gain work on risk preferences. In canonical risk preference paradigms (e.g., Dorison & Heller, 2022; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Ruggeri et al., 2020; Tversky & Kahneman, 1991), participants are confronted with choices between a sure option and a risky gamble. Importantly, probabilities for each option are provided. Prior research identifies a robust effect that generalizes across contexts: people are typically risk-averse when the choice options are presented as losses but risk-seeking when choice options are presented as gains. Our paradigm intentionally deviated from this large body of research on loss-gain framing effects on risk preferences. In the present paradigm, probabilities were unknown and participants were not presented with a choice between a sure option and a risky gamble because it would have been unrealistic to provide known probabilities about the pandemic. Thus, the present paradigm follows more directly from research in the health psychology literature that compares health actions associated with gains (e.g., wearing sunscreen to clear skin) vs. inaction associated with losses (e.g., not wearing sunscreen to skin cancer). This literature has yielded mixed results (Rothman & Salovey, 1997; Rothman & Sheeran, 2021) for the effects of framing, suggesting that key moderators remain to be identified (for reviews, see Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998; van't Riet et al., 2016).

There is at least one study, however, that used a reasonably comparable paradigm but which found divergent results: Abhyankar, O'Connor, and Lawron (2008) found a loss-frame advantage on intentions to obtain the MMR vaccine for one's child. It could be the case that the effects of loss- vs. gain- message framing differ when assessing health intentions for oneself vs. another person, especially when the other person is a child under one's care. Additional possibilities include that there may be something specific about an unfolding (and highly uncertain) pandemic that blunted such effects or that the gain/loss manipulations were weaker in the present study.

Four additional future directions merit note. First, following from the point above, while we found limited heterogeneity by country, future research could explore heterogeneity in the effect of message framing across other dimensions (e.g., such as the tightness vs. looseness of the culture; Gelfand et al., 2021; Uskul, Sherman, & Fitzgibbon, 2009). Indeed, it could be the case that our operationalization of country was limited by the manner in which we sampled participants. Second, while we also found limited heterogeneity in the effect of message framing across the different versions of loss and gain framing, future research could examine additional versions of these messages (e.g., self- vs. other-focused messages). Third, while we conducted an initial set of analyses with the pre-study survey (focused on pre-study worry), future research could test a more comprehensive set of hypotheses using these data. Finally, while the present work expanded the scope of nudge-style outcomes beyond behavior to include anxiety, future research is needed to further integrate emotional outcomes (both immediate and long-term) into cost-benefit calculations for implementing nudge-style interventions (e.g., framing). Not only does the subjective experience of emotion matter in and of itself (anxiety creates suffering) but

also the myriad effects of emotion on health (e.g., Emdin et al., 2016; Kubzansky & Kawachi, 2020) and health behavior (e.g., Dorison et al., 2020; Ferrer et al., 2020) matter as well.

Conclusion

In a global experiment spanning 84 countries and nearly 16,000 participants, loss vs. gain message framing had a widespread effect on self-reported anxiety while exerting no notable effects on cognitive and behavioral outcomes related to the COVID-19 pandemic. To the extent that policymakers and health organizations aim to minimize anxiety during a pandemic that has engendered high levels of stress and illness, our results provide evidence that gain framing may be superior to loss framing in communicating COVID-19 prevention messages. The results hold theoretical implications for multiple literatures, including research on health message framing, social influence, affective science, and public policy. More generally, the results underscore the lesson that, for policymakers and health organizations, large-scale collaborations can provide empirical answers to global questions (Coles et al. 2022; Forscher et al., in press), freeing communicators from having to rely on either intuition or speculation about applications of theory in particular contexts (c.f., Haushofer & Metcalf, 2020).

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Figure 1. An example of a public service announcement from the CDC. This public service announcement used gain-framed messages to encourage mask-wearing (image from May, 2021).

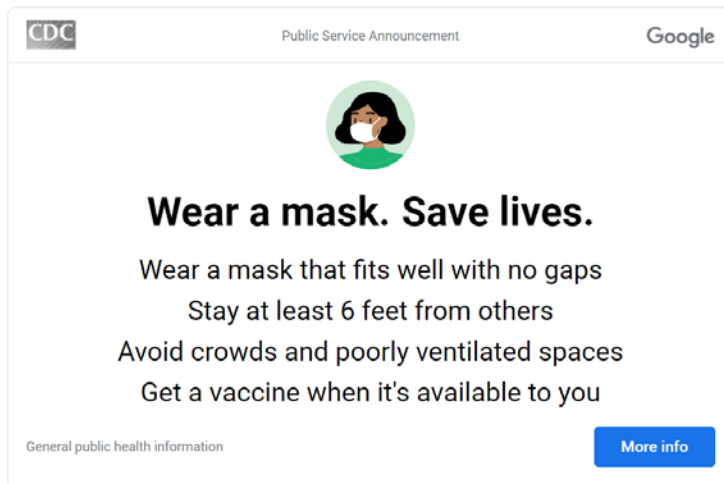


Figure 2. Loss-framed vs. gain-framed messages regarding COVID-19 influenced anxiety but not behavioral intentions, policy support, or information seeking. Cohen's *d* was used as the effect size, with positive values indicating higher levels of the outcome variable in the loss-framed vs. gain-framed condition. Dots and bars represent the effect size estimates and 95% confidence intervals respectively. Country-level effect size estimates are denoted in black and overall effect size estimates are denoted in yellow. Country names are denoted by their International Organization for Standardization codes. To improve the viewability of the x-axis, 40 countries with fewer than 30 participants per group (i.e., relatively wide error bars) are removed from the plot. Nevertheless, these countries are still included in the overall effect size estimates.

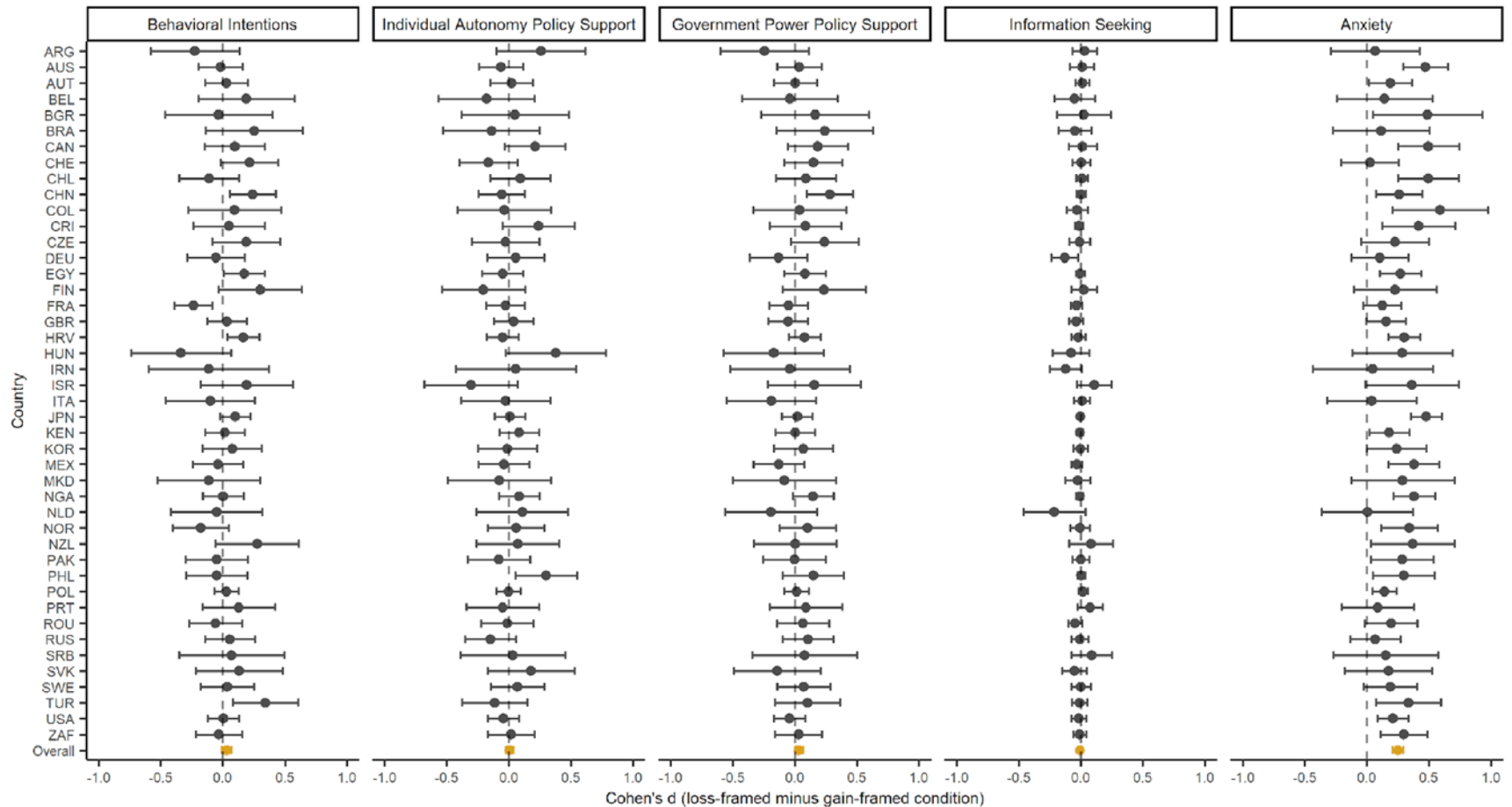


Table 1. Questions, response format, and relevant descriptive statistics of measures in the pre-study survey

| Question text | Response format | Relevant descriptives |
|---|---|---|
| In the past seven days, how many times did you go out of your home or residence? | Open numeric | M = 7.42, SD = 7.1 |
| In the past seven days, what were your reasons for going out of your home or residence? Please check all that apply. | Multiple choice | Work: 41%; Health visits: 16%; Groceries: 70% Non-essential goods: 21%; Visiting family and friends: 34%; Outdoor physical activity: 32%; Animal care: 12%; Other: 15 |
| Of the places that you visited in the past seven days, how many would you characterize as being crowded? Crowded here means that you could not maintain a 6-feet/2-meter distance between you and other people. | Numeric (1 = None of them; 6 = All of them) | M = 3.32, SD = 1.26 |
| When you have gone out in the past seven days, how often have you worn a mask for your face? | Numeric (1 = Never; 6 = All the time) | M = 4.44, SD = 1.64 |
| If you wore a mask when going outside your home, what type did you most frequently wear? | Forced choice | Cloth mask: 39%; Surgical mask: 33%; N95/FFP1/P100/other respirator: 6%; Homemade/makeshift mask: 4%; Unsure: 2%; None: 13%; Not applicable: 4% |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| In the past seven days, where have you most frequently directed your coughs and sneezes? | Forced choice | Air: 4%; Palms: 8%; Tissue/handkerchief: 10%; Elbow: 42%; Mask: 9%; Not applicable: 28% |
| Different cities and regions around the world are placing different levels of restrictions on their residents to slow the spread of COVID-19. Which of these options best describes the restrictions that are currently in place in your area? | Forced choice | Total lockdown: 12%; Partial lockdown: 60%; No lockdown: 28% |
| How difficult do you find the level of restrictions in your area to manage? | Numeric (1 = Not at all difficult, 5 = Extremely difficult) | M = 2.24, SD = 1.12 |
| I live in a country where the central government provides honest and helpful guidance about issues related to public health. | Numeric (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree) | M = 4.67, SD = 1.91 |
| I live in a city or region where the local government provides honest and helpful guidance about issues related to public health. | Numeric (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree) | M = 4.74, SD = 1.78 |
| To what degree are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the current policies of your national government to slow the spread of COVID-19? | Numeric (1 = Extremely dissatisfied, 7 = Extremely satisfied) | M = 4.24, SD = 1.72 |
| Have you ever been tested for COVID-19? | Forced choice | Yes, tested positive: 1%; Yes, tested negative, but diagnosed positive: 1%; Yes, tested negative, not diagnosed positive: 7%; No, diagnosed positive: 3%; No: 88% |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Are you currently self-isolating due to flu-like or cold-like symptoms? | Forced choice | Yes: 5%; No: 95% |
| To the best of your knowledge, have you been exposed to anyone known or suspected of having COVID-19 within the past two weeks? | Forced choice | Yes: 7%; No: 93% |
| How confident are you about your understanding of how COVID-19 spreads? | Numeric (1 = Not at all confident, 5 = Extremely confident) | M = 3.6, SD = 1 |
| Based on your current daily routine, how confident are you that you can prevent yourself from catching or spreading COVID-19? | Numeric (1 = Not at all confident, 5 = Extremely confident) | M = 3.32, SD = 1.05 |
| How worried are you that your physical well-being will get worse over the next two weeks? | Numeric (1 = Not at all worried, 5 = Extremely worried) | M = 1.99, SD = 1.08 |
| How worried are you that your emotional well-being will get worse over the next two weeks? | Numeric (1 = Not at all worried, 5 = Extremely worried) | M = 2.23, SD = 1.24 |
| How did you receive this survey? | Forced choice | Research agency: 20%; University pool: 29%; Friends or family: 17%; Social media: 27%; Other: 7% |
| How would you describe your current employment? | Forced choice | Employed with current income: 46%; Employed without current income: 6%; Not employed with current |

| | | |
|---|---------------|---|
| | | income: 15%; Not employed without current income: 32% |
| If you are employed, would you describe your current employment as providing an essential service during the pandemic? Essential services include roles for which interruptions would pose a danger to community health and safety. | Forced choice | Yes: 21%; No: 36%; Not employed: 43% |
| How old are you, in years? | Open numeric | M = 33.59, SD = 14.51 |
| What is your gender? | Forced choice | Female: 62%; Male: 37%; Other: 0%; Decline: 0% |
| What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, please indicate highest level received. | Forced choice | Less than high school: 2%; High school: 27%; Some college: 14%; Two year degree: 16%; Four year degree: 27%; Professional degree: 12%; Doctorate: 2%; Unknown: 0% |
| How would you describe the community where you're staying? | Forced choice | Urban: 56%; Suburban: 28%; Rural: 16% |
| Including you, how many members are there in your residence or household? | Open numeric | M = 3.68, SD = 2.45 |
| Of all the members, including you, how many have existing health conditions, such as heart or lung disease, diabetes, or a chronic illness? | Open numeric | M = 1.63, SD = 1.52 |

On which rung would you place yourself on this [socioeconomic status] ladder?

Numeric (1 = lowest, 10 = highest)

M = 5.76, SD = 1.8

Table 2. Outcome variables, question text, and response format for the main survey.

| Outcome variable | Item | Response format |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Behavioral Intentions | In the coming two weeks, if there is an order to stay at home at all times except times deemed essential, how likely are you to follow that order? | 7-point scale with the following points: Extremely unlikely, moderately unlikely, slightly unlikely, neither likely nor unlikely, slightly likely, moderately likely, extremely likely |
| Behavioral Intentions | In the coming two weeks, if you are taking care of someone who is sick with COVID-19, how likely are you to wear a mouth and nose covering (such as a mask) in public at all times? | 7-point scale with the following points: Extremely unlikely, moderately unlikely, slightly unlikely, neither likely nor unlikely, slightly likely, moderately likely, extremely likely |
| Behavioral Intentions | In the coming two weeks, if you notice yourself coughing and sneezing, how likely are you to wear a mouth and nose covering (such as a mask) in public at all times? | 7-point scale with the following points: Extremely unlikely, moderately unlikely, slightly unlikely, neither likely nor unlikely, slightly likely, moderately likely, extremely likely |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Behavioral Intentions | In the coming two weeks, if you think you may have been exposed to COVID-19, how likely are you to completely isolate yourself? | 7-point scale with the following points: Extremely unlikely, moderately unlikely, slightly unlikely, neither likely nor unlikely, slightly likely, moderately likely, extremely likely |
| Policy support (individual autonomy) | Government health officials should allow individuals to determine how best to deal with the present COVID-19 pandemic | 7-point scale with the following points: Strongly disagree, moderately disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, moderately agree, strongly agree |
| Policy support (individual autonomy) | Individuals, not governments, should decide how best to act during the COVID-19 pandemic | 7-point scale with the following points: Strongly disagree, moderately disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, moderately agree, strongly agree |
| Policy support (government power) | Government health officials should authorize law enforcement to fine anyone who violates restrictions to slow the spread of COVID-19 | 7-point scale with the following points: Strongly disagree, moderately disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, moderately agree, |

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| | | strongly agree |
| Policy support (government power) | Government health officials should do everything in their power to address the spread of COVID-19, even if it severely limits daily activities for citizens | 7-point scale with the following points: Strongly disagree, moderately disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, moderately agree, strongly agree |
| Policy support (government power) | Government health officials should decide how long social distancing practices stay in place | 7-point scale with the following points: Strongly disagree, moderately disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, moderately agree, strongly agree |
| Anxiety | To what extent do you feel anxious when considering these recommendations? | 5-point scale with the following points: not at all, slightly, moderately, very much, extremely |
| Anxiety | To what extent do you feel afraid when considering these recommendations? | 5-point scale with the following points: not at all, slightly, moderately, very |

| | | |
|---------------------|--|---|
| | | much, extremely |
| Anxiety | To what extent do you feel fearful when considering these recommendations? | 5-point scale with the following points: not at all, slightly, moderately, very much, extremely |
| Information seeking | At the end of the study today, would you like to learn the latest reliable information about COVID-19? | binary response: yes, no |
