



REVIEW ARTICLE

The Personal-Policy Collision: Messaging, Trust, and Behavioral Response in a Global Health Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic brought to light the complex interplay between individual behavior and institutional policy. During the global health crisis, it highlighted how public health messaging, levels of trust in authorities, and personal values shape behavioral responses. Here we review elements of the effectiveness and pitfalls of health communication strategies, the role of trust in government and healthcare systems, and how these factors influence individual compliance or resistance to public policy. By drawing on qualitative and quantitative insights from the literature, lessons are learned for more effective, culturally sensitive public health messaging and communication styles, and showcased for future public health emergencies.

Introduction

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic forced individuals, communities and nations to navigate the many challenges posed by the spread of the virus. Public policy during a pandemic often requires difficult trade-offs, and these trade-offs resonate differently depending on one's unique perspective and experience¹. Policies, while necessary for public health, often collided with perspectives of personal freedoms, individual and community economic needs, and social/cultural considerations. Governments had to quickly implement measures to limit the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns, mask mandates, travel restrictions, and eventually vaccine rollouts, creating tension between the public's personal choices and the collective needs of society²⁻⁵. Personal experiences were shaped by a variety of factors, such as the severity of the virus in a region, personal health conditions, individual economic impact, and the level of trust in public health information. This collision created tension between the public's personal choices and the collective needs of society. This complex intersection of personal and public health challenges, requires governments to balance public safety with individual and community socioeconomic well-being⁶⁻⁸.

Communication and messaging play a pivotal role in mediating the tension between individual choices and collective societal needs during a health crisis⁹⁻¹². Messaging focuses on the content of the information itself, while communication encompasses the entire process of sharing, receiving, and interpreting messages, including the channel and context. When messaging is clear, consistent, and empathetic, it can bridge the gap between personal autonomy and public responsibility by helping individuals understand *why* certain policies exist and *how* their behavior impacts others. However, when communication is confusing, inconsistent, overly technical, or delivered without cultural sensitivity, it can intensify the collision—people may feel alienated, mistrustful, or manipulated, leading to resistance or noncompliance. Messaging also frames the narrative: if it emphasizes solidarity and mutual care,

it can align personal values with collective goals. But if it comes off as coercive or top-down, it may provoke defensiveness or skepticism, deepening the divide. In this way, messaging doesn't just convey information—it actively shapes how people interpret the crisis and make choices within it.

The pandemic not only highlighted the fragile balance between public policy and personal experience but also illuminated the multifaceted challenges of aligning individual behaviors with collective health goals. This tension revealed the need for public health strategies that are not solely grounded in epidemiological data, but that also account for the psychological, cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions of individual decision-making. At the heart of this balancing act lies the role of trust—trust in government institutions, in scientific expertise, and in the information being communicated. The success or failure of health interventions often depended not just on the policies themselves, but on how those policies were conveyed and perceived. Thus, the pandemic underscored the essential role of communication—not merely as a tool for information dissemination, but as a dynamic process through which public understanding, emotional response, and behavioral compliance are shaped.

The aim and scope of this review is to highlight literature that underscores how trust and communication intersect with policy implementation and personal experience, offering critical insights for designing more responsive, equitable, and effective public health responses in future global crises. Four key areas are emphasized: **(i) Public Health versus Personal Economic Consequences, (ii) Public Trust and Individual Responsibility, (iii) Messaging and Public Trust, and (iv) Communication and Personal Trust.** These four domains warrant emphasis because they represent the core tensions and mechanisms that shaped individual and collective responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the trade-off between public health and personal economic consequences reflects a critical axis of conflict, where policies aimed at controlling viral spread often led to job losses, financial instability, and broader

economic strain, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations. Second, public trust and individual responsibility are tightly interlinked; the effectiveness of health policies hinges on the extent to which individuals trust institutions and internalize responsibility for protecting community health. Third, messaging plays a vital role in cultivating or eroding public trust—clear, transparent, and empathetic communication fosters understanding and compliance, while inconsistent or politicized messaging can generate skepticism and resistance. Lastly, communication and personal trust underscore the relational and emotional dimensions of health governance; how people interpret, respond to, and emotionally process public health guidance is deeply rooted in their trust in both the messenger and the message. Together, these four domains encapsulate the interplay of structural, psychological, and communicative factors that must be examined to fully understand behavioral responses in a global health crisis and to inform more effective policy design in the future.

1. Public Health versus Personal Economic Consequences

Public health policy and personal health outcomes are two critical and interrelated aspects of society and individual well-being^{13,14}. These domains frequently intersect, and decisions made in one area influence the other. They highlight the complex relationship between public health and personal and socioeconomic and health outcomes, especially in times of crisis¹⁵. Economic balance needs to consider that while public health measures may be necessary, they often come with significant economic costs^{16,17}. The public health crisis led to widespread economic consequences—job losses, business closures, and financial hardship for many individuals¹⁸. Public policy therefore must balance public health measures with economic realities¹⁹⁻²¹ that impact individuals and communities^{22,23}.

Globally, the pandemic tested healthcare systems, overwhelmed hospitals, and exposed gaps in infrastructure, especially in low-income areas¹⁷.

Governments were also faced with urgent decisions about how to protect public health while managing the long-term mental health impacts of the pandemic²⁴⁻²⁶. Economic distress can worsen public health outcomes (e.g., stress, mental health issues, or lack of access to health services). Navigating the balance of these domains is key for ensuring both a healthy society and individual stability.

Policies that prioritize economic growth without addressing public health needs (e.g., underfunding healthcare systems) can also lead to worse health outcomes and increased long-term economic burdens²⁷. The ideal approach is often one that finds a balance: promoting policies that both protect public health and minimize economic harm²⁸. For example, providing financial support for individuals during health crises (e.g., unemployment benefits, paid sick leave) can help reduce personal economic consequences while still prioritizing public health goals. In the US, financial assistance was offered as a stimulus package to offset the economic impact of the pandemic²⁹.

Healthcare costs should be considered including the personal financial burden of accessing health services, including insurance premiums, out-of-pocket expenses for medical care, and long-term costs for chronic illness management^{30,31}. For the future, a well-funded, effective public health system can reduce the personal economic burden of healthcare costs³². Conversely, an inefficient or costly healthcare system can exacerbate the financial strain on individuals, especially in cases of chronic illness or major health emergencies³³. Some have estimated that a single-payer universal healthcare system would have saved 212,000 lives in 2020 alone.³⁴

A primary challenge of the healthcare system was ensuring equitable access to vaccines, treatments, and healthcare, particularly for vulnerable populations. The pandemic exposed deep-seated social inequalities³⁵, revealing gaps in public health infrastructure³⁶, particularly in low-income regions, and highlighted the importance of global cooperation in tackling health crises^{37,38}. Due to the pandemic,

it was found probable that a significant portion of Americans that were uninsured were less likely to seek medical care for COVID-19 symptoms³⁹. People in marginalized and rural communities often face higher infection rates and more severe outcomes, partly due to preexisting health disparities and systemic factors such as limited access to healthcare, crowded living conditions, and employment in essential jobs that couldn't be done remotely^{40,41}. Policy decisions must address issues of equity, as marginalized communities are typically disproportionately affected by both disease and the economic fallout^{23,42,43}.

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound and lasting impacts on both public policy and personal economic circumstances. Going forward, both public policy and personal economic conditions need evolve to reflect the lessons learned from the pandemic⁴⁴. For example, Public Health systems are adapting to prioritize pandemic preparedness, leading to stronger public health frameworks^{45,46}. In a post-COVID world, the economic landscape will likely continue to evolve, and people will need to adapt in various ways. The pandemic highlighted how important it is to have financial resilience. For some, the pandemic was a catalyst for personal reinvention or financial growth, while for others, it highlighted vulnerabilities that continue to affect their financial stability and job security. People may be more focused on building emergency savings, investing wisely, and diversifying income sources. COVID-19 also sparked creativity in terms of new business models. The pandemic exposed the importance of mental health and work-life balance, especially with the rise of burnout from remote work. The ultimate impact on personal economic well-being varies widely, depending on one's industry, location, and access to resources. The pandemic has shown that the ability to pivot and diversify is key to thriving in an uncertain world. Moving forward, people need to adapt by being more flexible, tech-savvy, financially aware, and mindful of mental and physical well-being.

2. Public Trust and Individual Responsibility

Personal responsibility shifted significantly during the pandemic, influenced by both individual actions and broader societal expectations. COVID-19 reshaped daily life, creating psychological distress based upon the message and communication style⁴⁷. The personal perspective varied greatly depending on one's experiences, values, and priorities, such as health risks, financial strain, social isolation, and uncertainty^{48,49}. Individuals faced personal concerns about how to protect themselves and their loved ones while managing their daily life⁵⁰. Hence, the pandemic highlighted personal values, fears, and priorities^{51,52}, influencing how individuals heard a message and perceived public policy^{53,54}.

While some individuals prioritized personal freedoms and questioned mandates, others emphasized the need for solidarity in the face of the global crisis, understanding that collective action was necessary to overcome the pandemic⁵⁵. Individual susceptibility to information seems therefore to be reflective of emotional status and education^{56,57}. Personal responsibility for health has been framed as a contested criterion⁵⁸. Underlying the concept of personal choice is consideration of freedom and societal debt which is not necessarily aligned⁵⁸. However, during a Pandemic, personal and social responsibilities can co-exist which can influence and determine health care priority based on personal responsibility (Table 1).

Personal responsibility during COVID-19 expanded beyond the individual to include communal and societal aspects⁵⁹⁻⁶¹. It required individuals to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, take ownership of their health, and consider the well-being of others. People who prioritize personal freedom might see public health policies as intrusive, while those who prioritize collective safety might view them as necessary protective measures for society at large⁶². Consequently, there needs to be careful consideration of legal and ethical frameworks in messaging. Because of the global nature of

pandemics, international and national laws should be considered when implementing pandemic-related restrictions⁶³. Rights such as freedom of movement, privacy, and expression need to be weighed against the need to protect the public and communicated thoughtfully. Ethical dilemmas are important to discuss in open forums without confirmational bias. Decisions about how to allocate scarce resources (e.g., ventilators, vaccines) often involve ethical trade-offs.

Trust in government and public health recommendations plays a significant role in how policies are received⁶⁴. The pandemic affected everyone differently, with different people experiencing varying levels of risk and hardship⁶⁵. Some individuals may have felt that governments overreached or made decisions without sufficient transparency, undermining trust⁶⁶. Others may feel that individual freedoms were disrespected, such as the right to choose whether to follow mask mandates or get vaccinated⁶⁷. Ultimately, the pandemic underscored the need for coordinated global action, trust in authorities, and a balance between individual rights and collective action^{68,69}. It also sparked broader debates on government roles, individual autonomy, and solidarity, with lessons learned to guide future health crises^{11,70}.

Public health officials and Governments must consider how to mitigate such impacts, especially for vulnerable populations⁷¹. The pandemic highlighted and often worsened social inequalities, with marginalized communities bearing the brunt of both the health crisis and its economic fallout. Personal experiences of these inequalities—whether in terms of healthcare access, job security, or housing instability—can shape one's stance on government intervention and public policy. A person from a disadvantaged background might feel that government intervention is critical to provide support in the form of financial aid, healthcare access, and social services, arguing for more robust public policy. Conversely, an individual with greater economic resources may believe that the market and personal responsibility should play a larger role in navigating the pandemic's effects. Public trust can increase when

leaders and health organizations show empathy for people's struggles—whether they are dealing with illness, economic hardship, or social isolation⁷². Ensuring that social safety nets are strong and that these communities are supported is an essential part of a balanced response.

The liberties of individuals need to be considered in public health measures⁷³. However, the public health response to the pandemic also needed to prioritize population health. It was argued that populations have a collective right to public health, meriting the restriction of individual liberties where necessary and proportionate to protecting public health^{74,75}. Measures like quarantine, vaccination mandates, mask-wearing, and social distancing were considered necessary to slow the spread of disease. Given the gravity of the pandemic, indirect evidence of benefit combined with the low risk of harm was considered to outweigh the absence of direct evidence⁷⁶. However, these measures were thought to infringe on personal freedoms, leading to debates about how far governments should go in enforcing these policies^{74,75}. While a majority of individuals followed mask mandates, there was a portion of those who did not⁷⁷. It seems this negative attitude resulted from a perception of ineffectiveness and psychological reactance⁷⁷. A growing body of research is showing that health messages are often more effective when they are tailored to match important characteristics of the recipient^{78,79}.

There is individual confirmational bias as people are prone to misinterpreting evidence about vaccines, for example, in ways that reflect their underlying beliefs⁸⁰. Hence, confirmation bias is an important consideration in messaging and in communication style. Striking a balance between ensuring public safety and respecting personal freedoms can be challenging and need fine tuning for the future. For example, it is clear masking, and social distancing can thwart transmission of a virus as evidenced of reduction of flu numbers during the pandemic⁸¹. Even before COVID-19, data supported the utility of masking to reduce viral transmission of influenza⁸². Hence, better tailored messaging of such associations

could have helped convey trust. However, each person also has a responsibility to contribute positively to these spaces by avoiding harmful language and respectfully disagreeing with others.

Individuals may take a nationalistic view, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing their own country's needs⁸³. Public policy decisions during COVID-19 have often pitted national interests against global cooperation³⁸. Countries have had to weigh the importance of securing vaccines and resources for their own citizens versus the moral responsibility to help other nations facing severe challenges. Others may argue from a humanitarian perspective, believing that helping poorer nations will ultimately benefit everyone in the global fight against the virus⁸⁴. The importance of personal responsibility in preventing the spread of infectious diseases is now clearer.

The pandemic forced many to confront mental health challenges. The isolation and uncertainty brought by COVID-19 made individuals more aware of the

importance of resilience, mental well-being, and the need to maintain social connections, even if virtually⁸⁵. The development and rollout of COVID-19 vaccines sparked debates about vaccine hesitancy. While many embraced vaccinations as essential for community health, others raised concerns about safety and efficacy⁸⁶. This has led to a more critical reflection on the relationship between science, trust, and public health. Many have reevaluated their lifestyle and social habits. The pandemic forced individuals to adjust to remote work, virtual socializing, and redefined public spaces. Post-COVID, some individuals continue to value the flexibility of working from home and maintaining a greater work-life balance. The post-COVID world will likely see a continued focus on public health systems' capacity to manage infectious diseases, while personal responsibility for health will remain key. There will be more collaboration between governments, healthcare providers, and individuals to manage future health threats and create a healthier, more equitable society.

Table 1. Personal Perspectives and Responsibility

Health and Safety Practices	Increased Emphasis on Hygiene and Self-Care	Personal responsibility around hygiene (e.g., frequent handwashing, mask-wearing) became a widespread public responsibility. Individuals took it upon themselves to limit the spread of the virus by following health protocols ⁸⁷
	Social Distancing	The responsibility of keeping a safe physical distance from others became a new norm, with people adjusting their social lives to avoid transmission ⁸⁸⁻⁹⁰
Remote Work and Education	Home-Based Responsibility	Many people were suddenly responsible for maintaining productivity while working or studying from home. This shift required individuals to adapt to new routines, manage time effectively, and sometimes balance work and personal life in the same space ⁹¹
	Self-Discipline in Remote Learning	Students had to take on more responsibility for their own learning, as online education required greater independence and self-motivation ^{92,93}
Mental Health Awareness	Focus on Mental Health	The pandemic brought a surge in awareness around mental health, and there was a greater societal emphasis on personal responsibility for one's well-being. People were encouraged to manage stress, seek help when needed, and find ways to cope with isolation or uncertainty ^{47,94}

	Social Media Responsibility	The pandemic led to increased social media use, where individuals had to take responsibility for their own consumption of information, ensuring they were relying on credible sources and not spreading misinformation ⁹⁵⁻⁹⁷
Community and Social Responsibility	Civic Duty to Protect Others	Many felt a heightened sense of responsibility toward vulnerable populations, such as the elderly or immunocompromised. Acts of kindness like shopping for others or supporting local businesses became more common ⁹⁸
	Volunteering and Charitable Acts	There was an increased focus on volunteering, with people stepping up to help communities impacted by the pandemic, whether through food banks, personal protective equipment donations, or other forms of assistance.
Pandemic Response Compliance	Following Government Guidelines	Individuals had to take responsibility for understanding and following ever-changing guidelines around lockdowns, mask mandates, and travel restrictions. Some people took this more seriously than others, leading to varied responses based on personal interpretation of risks ⁹⁹
	Personal Accountability for Vaccination	As vaccines became available, personal responsibility for getting vaccinated was a key part of controlling the spread. People had to make informed decisions about their own health and, in some cases, the health of their families and communities ^{100,101}
Consumer Behavior	Shift in Shopping and Consumption	The way people approached consumerism changed, with a stronger focus on online shopping and a heightened awareness of the environmental and health impacts of their purchasing decisions ^{18,102}
	Financial Responsibility	Some individuals had to take on greater financial responsibility, especially as many faced job losses or economic strain. This led to an increased focus on budgeting, managing expenses, and seeking alternative income sources ¹⁰³
Ethical and Social Responsibility	Personal Decisions with Broader Impacts	Many personal decisions, such as attending gatherings, travel plans, or even going to work, were framed as being ethically responsible toward others. It wasn't just about individual freedoms but how personal actions affected the larger community ^{104,105}
	Support for Policy Changes	There was also an increased call for personal responsibility in advocating for and supporting public health policies that could mitigate the spread of the virus and provide equitable care to all citizens ¹⁰⁶

3. Messaging and Public Trust

Probably the most important component of dealing with a pandemic is communication and messaging whether it's from governments, organizations, scientists, politicians, medical professionals or individuals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, messaging (both official and social) played a critical role in shaping public behavior and individual trust in health guidelines. The pandemic created a challenging environment where the balance between public health messaging, trust in institutions, and personal beliefs was often tested. Messaging around COVID-19 played a critical role in shaping public trust, adherence to public health guidelines, and overall responses to the pandemic^{107,108}. Clear and transparent communication about the need for certain policies is essential to maintain trust. When individuals understand the rationale behind policies, they are more likely to comply voluntarily¹⁰⁹. Fear and confusion in messaging often leads to the spread of misinformation and disinformation¹¹⁰.

The way governments, health organizations, and even the media communicated about the virus, its spread, and the measures to protect public health had a significant impact on the public's willingness to trust the information and follow recommended actions. Both public health authorities and the public had to adapt and display responsiveness to messaging. As the pandemic progressed, public health authorities had to adapt their strategies. This was especially true when new variants of the virus emerged or when vaccines became widely available^{5,111,112}. Public trust could be maintained when authorities communicated that adaptations were based on new evidence and evolving understanding of the virus¹¹³. The public generally appreciated honest updates and explanations for why things were changing, even if the situation was complex and fluid¹¹⁴.

Yet, the spread of misinformation can undermine public health efforts and erode trust in health authorities. Governments and organizations had to develop, distribute, and monitor vaccines at an

unprecedented pace, all while managing public trust and navigating misinformation about the virus¹¹⁵. Efforts to counter false narratives and promote accurate information must be a priority to avoid polarization¹¹⁶. In many countries, COVID-19 became highly politicized. Political polarization and social media played a significant role in influencing the effectiveness of messaging, sometimes undermining public trust¹¹⁷. Different political factions often presented contrasting messages about the virus, which contributed to confusion and division¹¹⁸. Politicized messaging hurt public trust, especially when leaders downplayed the severity of the virus or opposed public health measures¹¹⁹. Consequently, public health officials needed to work to keep their messaging non-partisan and focused on scientific facts to maintain public trust across political lines.

False dichotomy analysis of key issues surrounding COVID-19 suggest that several false dichotomies were used to polarize debates while oversimplifying complex issues¹²⁰. These authors urge a nuanced understanding of the science and caution against black-or-white messaging, all-or-nothing guidance, and one-size-fits-all approaches. Still the messaging around COVID-19 policies demonstrated the importance of delicate balance between communicating facts, showing empathy, and responding to public concerns¹²¹. Some research suggests that messaging and communication style in and of itself does not lead to higher levels of trust and compliance but depend on existing high levels of trust with authorities¹²². This focuses attention to public relations by emphasizing the importance of establishing credibility prior to crises¹²².

Building trust also requires effort and a recognition that scientific work isn't just about generating knowledge—it's about helping the public understand its implications and limitations, rebuilding trust in science¹²³. While messaging that **focused on science and expertise**, while being adaptable to new information, and helped establish authority and trustworthiness¹²⁴, trust in science still took a hit¹²⁵. COVID-19 messaging was heavily reliant on scientific

data, but early in the pandemic, there was still much unknown about the virus. This left space for speculation, which could erode public trust¹²⁶. Weak or early-stage studies often received disproportionate attention, leading to confusion and sometimes misguided policy decisions^{3,127}. Given the urgency of the pandemic, the pressure to publish and find solutions quickly led to many studies being rushed or released with less rigorous methodologies, including small sample sizes, non-randomized designs, and lack of control groups¹²⁸. Despite these flaws, some of these studies were cited widely and sometimes used to influence policy, media narratives, or public health guidelines.

Another notable issue was the speed at which research was disseminated—sometimes in preprints or media outlets without thorough peer review¹²⁹. This made it easier for flawed research to gain traction. In some cases, findings that were later refuted or revised continued to shape public discourse, as the initial sensational headlines stuck with people more than the later corrections¹³⁰.

(<https://retractionwatch.com/retracted-coronavirus-covid-19-papers/>). Additionally, there was a tendency for the social media and different interest groups to latch onto studies that supported their existing positions, exemplifying confirmational bias^{95,121,131}. For instance, early research on hydroxychloroquine or masks, before large-scale, rigorous studies provided more clarity, created significant divisions in public opinion and policy decisions^{132,133}. These early studies weren't necessarily "bad," but the context in which they were interpreted often led to inflated claims. The result is that some of the limitations, such as small sample sizes or the lack of generalizability, were downplayed in favor of drawing broad conclusions. In turn, this leads to an ongoing conversation about how future public health crises can better balance the need for speed with the need for rigor in research while managing misinformation¹²¹.

When experts fail to communicate their findings and explain their reasoning in an accessible and transparent way, it creates a vacuum where misinformation and distrust can thrive. When scientific

advice appeared to change, it created doubt about the reliability of health experts¹³⁴. Communicating the science behind decisions—such as the basis for lockdowns, social distancing, or the development of vaccines—is essential for maintaining public trust. It is important to realize that a decline of public trust in scientific experts is often due to a lack of communication and not a distrust in science itself or scientists themselves¹³⁵. This is a significant challenge in today's world, where scientific knowledge and expertise play a crucial role in decision-making, yet many people feel disconnected from or skeptical of those who hold that expertise because of a lack of clear messaging and communication approach.

Apart from local government organizations' engagement strategies in COVID-related posts on social media¹³⁶, regular public engagement from scientists could have served to bridge this gap¹²³. Scientists often work in highly specialized fields, and the language they use can be difficult for the public to understand. This sometimes creates a barrier that makes people feel disconnected from the scientific process. However, when scientists take the time to explain their findings in clear, accessible language and engage in ongoing dialogue, it helps demystify their work and shows that their findings aren't just abstract concepts but have real-world implications.

Post-pandemic messaging and public trust are deeply interconnected, as the pandemic has reshaped how people engage with information and institutions. Effective messaging in the post-pandemic era is crucial for rebuilding and maintaining individual and public trust, especially in areas like healthcare, public policy, and scientific research. Hence, clear messaging translating scientific results into tangible action that people can relate to in their daily lives is needed¹³⁷. Post-pandemic messaging and communication should be rooted in transparency, empathy, and a commitment to rebuilding trust. As people process the aftermath of the pandemic, institutions that embrace these principles will be better positioned to engage the public, reduce misinformation, and support recovery efforts. The goal is to create a more informed,

resilient society that can navigate future challenges with greater unity and confidence. Table 2 illustrates a few key themes and considerations for post-pandemic messaging.

Table 2. Key Themes to Foster Trust for Individuals and the Public

Transparency and Honesty	Importance of Clear, Accurate Information	In the post-COVID world, the emphasis on transparency is vital ¹³⁸ . Governments, health organizations, and leaders must provide honest, evidence-based information, even if the truth is uncomfortable or evolving ¹³⁹
	Admitting Mistakes and Course Corrections	Acknowledging the complexity of the situation and that recommendations may evolve based on new information builds trust ¹⁴⁰
Building Empathy	Humanizing the Message	Acknowledging the emotional toll of the pandemic is essential. Public messages that show empathy fosters a sense of shared humanity and can increase trust in institutions that demonstrate care ¹⁴¹
	Highlighting Community Efforts	Messaging that focuses on collective actions and community solidarity can build trust in public health initiatives and the value of working together in future crises ¹¹⁹
Consistency Across Platforms	Unified Communication	Mixed messages from different agencies, organizations, or politicians were a significant issue during the pandemic. Moving forward, consistent communication from public officials, scientific experts, and media outlets will be crucial in maintaining public trust ¹²⁶
	Harnessing Multiple Platforms	Engaging with diverse audiences through multiple communication channels (social media, news outlets, community organizations) ensures messages reach as many people as possible in formats that resonate with them ¹⁴²
Promoting Science and Expertise	Highlighting Experts, Not Just Politicians	Public trust in scientific expertise was tested throughout the pandemic. Post-COVID - emphasize the importance of expert knowledge and evidence-based decision-making, ensuring that scientific voices are heard and respected ¹²⁶

	Navigating Misinformation	Addressing misinformation directly by promoting media literacy, fact-checking, and offering clear, reliable sources of information is critical to building and maintaining trust ¹⁴³ .
Inclusivity and Equity	Reaching All Communities	Messaging must be inclusive, addressing the needs and concerns of not just the individual but also diverse groups. This means considering language barriers, cultural differences, and varying access to information. Equitable health policies and responses will also be a key theme ¹⁴⁴ .
	Highlighting Vulnerable Populations	It's essential to demonstrate that messaging and policies have the wellbeing of marginalized and vulnerable individuals and populations at the forefront, ensuring they are not left behind in recovery efforts ⁷¹
Focus on Long-Term Health and Recovery	Rebuilding Trust in Health Systems	Many healthcare systems were strained by COVID-19, leading to gaps in trust. Messaging should focus on how healthcare systems are recovering, learning from past mistakes, and making improvements to ensure better preparedness for future crises ¹⁴⁵
	Emphasizing Mental Health	In the aftermath of COVID-19, mental health has become a priority area. Addressing the psychological effects of the pandemic, offering support services, and reducing stigma around mental health are all essential in post-COVID messaging ¹⁴⁶ .
Acknowledging Divisions and Polarization	Bridging Gaps	The pandemic revealed deep divisions in many societies, particularly in responses to health measures like vaccinations or lockdowns. Post-COVID messaging should focus on unity and common ground, acknowledging different viewpoints and promoting respectful dialogue ¹⁴⁷
Preparing for Future Crises	Preventing Complacency	Messaging should remind the public of the lessons learned during the pandemic, reinforcing the importance of preparation and vigilance for future health crises. A balance must be struck between optimism and realistic planning ^{148,149}
	Public Health Resilience	Building trust requires reassuring the public that systems are in place to prevent or respond more effectively to any future health challenges ^{150,151}

4. Communication and Personal Trust

A challenge emerged as the virus spread and new data highlighted, requiring public health agencies and governments to adjust their strategies. Messaging that failed to acknowledge the diversity of experiences could alienate certain groups¹⁵². Table 3 illustrates key takeaways for effective communication in health-related campaigns. Sometimes, adjustments in policies or in presented information were seen as a lack of transparency, especially when certain early warnings about the virus were downplayed¹⁵³. When authorities were open about what was known and what wasn't, it fostered trust¹⁵⁴. However, downplaying risks, failing to disclose challenges in managing the pandemic, or ignoring cultural experiences created skepticism and mistrust in the messaging¹⁵⁵.

While facts and guidelines are critical, showing understanding of the fears and concerns is equally important¹⁵⁶. Consequently, empathy and reassurance can help people feel heard and understood during crisis. Compassionate communication can help calm anxiety, making people feel supported rather than judged^{157,158}. A tone that acknowledges the struggles and sacrifices people are facing helps build a stronger connection. Unfortunately, the tone of the messaging during the pandemic from leaders and health officials varied widely^{159,160}.

Although there are valuable lessons to be learned from literature on patient-provider communication, communication between public health authorities and the general-public operates on a different level. Therefore, public health authorities must deliver targeted, customized messaging. In some countries, the messaging was more authoritative and urgent, while in others, it was more relaxed or politicized¹⁰⁸. In general, the tone needed to be empathetic, acknowledging the fear and uncertainty people felt. Public health officials who delivered messages with empathy and reassurance helped maintain public trust¹⁶¹.

From a personal perspective communication that provides transparency, clarity, and consistency is

critical for building trust in pandemic messaging¹⁶². Transparency helps to reduce fear and uncertainty by providing accurate and timely information¹⁶³. When messaging is consistent, it reinforces the guidance and recommendations, making it easier for people to follow and feel confident in the decisions they're making. Additionally, clarity is key. If messages are confusing or too complex, they can create skepticism or lead to misinformation.

One of the biggest obstacles to trust during the pandemic was the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Much of this type of information was brought about through social media and sharing among many¹⁴². Social media became a major platform for information (and misinformation) during the pandemic¹⁶⁴. Influencers played a role in shaping public opinion. Influences on social media ran rampant. False claims about cures, vaccines, or the virus's origins spread rapidly through social media and news outlets¹⁶⁵. The prevalence of misinformation undermined trust in reliable sources of information. When people were exposed to conflicting narratives, particularly from social media or fringe groups, it became difficult to discern which sources were trustworthy. Efforts to combat misinformation—like fact-checking and promoting accurate sources—were necessary to maintain public trust, but misinformation often spread faster than efforts to counteract it^{166,167}. However, results also show that while interventions can successfully reduce belief in false information, they can negatively impact the credibility of information¹⁶⁷.

Trust in information often depended on the credibility of the source. Social media platforms were pressured to regulate content to prevent misinformation, but their effectiveness was sometimes questioned¹⁶⁷. Social media offers a platform for people to connect, but it can also be a breeding ground for negativity, bullying, and toxic behavior¹⁴². In the age of instant news, misinformation and rumors spread easily. Social media users have a responsibility to fact-check what they share and to avoid spreading false or misleading information.

The communication takeaways are vital lessons learned from the pandemic, shaping how we approach communication in future crises, health messaging, and day-to-day interactions. Post-COVID communication should prioritize honesty, empathy, inclusivity, and a clear, consistent message that empowers people with the knowledge they need to navigate a rapidly changing world. It's about learning from past mistakes and applying those lessons to ensure a more informed, prepared, and unified society moving forward. Post-COVID messaging should focus not only on the recovery of systems and infrastructure but also on individual and societal healing. Messages that offer hope, renewal, and optimism can be powerful. As the world recovers from the pandemic, messaging should reinforce the importance of long-term health strategies and pandemic preparedness, ensuring that lessons learned are applied to future crises.

Overall, the pandemic highlighted the importance of clear, consistent, and transparent messaging in fostering trust. Trust in health officials, governmental bodies, and personal social networks was crucial in determining how individuals responded to the pandemic. Messages that considered local contexts and offered clear, actionable guidance were more effective than those that created confusion or were seen as politically driven. It also underlined the role that misinformation, political views, and personal beliefs can have on public health efforts. Moving forward, learning how to communicate effectively in times of crisis—and how to build trust in institutions—will be critical for managing future public health challenges.

Table 3. Communication Takeaways

Government and Health Organization Messaging	Clarity and Consistency	Mixed messages, such as initial confusion over mask-wearing or social distancing guidelines, sometimes led to confusion or distrust. When guidance evolved (as the science behind COVID-19 became clearer), it sometimes undermined trust, as people might have viewed this as inconsistency rather than adaptive learning ^{119,168} .
	Tone and Transparency	The tone of the messaging mattered. In some cases, overly strict or alarmist messages led to fear, while others felt that the messaging wasn't strong enough. Transparency about uncertainties also played a role. Health organizations like the WHO or CDC had to balance showing leadership while admitting there was a lot to learn about the virus ^{107,169,170} .
	Empathy and Understanding	People tend to trust messages that come from a place of empathy and consideration of their concerns. Being able to relate to the audience's needs, fears, or emotions can foster a sense of connection and trust ¹⁷¹ .
	Responsiveness	How responsive the message sender is to concerns and questions also matters. Public figures or organizations that engage with the public and show that they listen to concerns and respond thoughtfully can cultivate greater trust ¹⁷² .

Social Media and Misinformation	Misinformation Spread	Social media became a crucial platform during the pandemic, but it was also a breeding ground for misinformation. Conspiracy theories, anti-vaccine rhetoric, and false cures gained traction, which led to significant distrust in health measures and authorities ^{173,174} . People often relied on their social circles (online and offline) for information, which could lead to echo chambers of misinformation ^{175,176} .
	Distrust of Experts	In some cases, distrust of traditional media and public health experts became widespread, with people turning to alternative sources. This eroded trust in official messaging, particularly when it came to controversial topics like vaccine development or lockdown measures ¹⁷⁷ .
Political Influence on Trust	Political Polarization	Trust in communicating an action was heavily influenced by political beliefs ¹⁷⁸ . In some countries, COVID-19 became deeply politicized, with different political factions either promoting or downplaying the severity of the virus. The way messages about the pandemic were framed by politicians often aligned with voters' pre-existing beliefs, leading to significant divisions in trust leading to a segment of the population questioning the necessity of certain health measures ¹¹⁷ .
	Vaccine Hesitancy	Communicating around vaccines became a highly polarized issue ¹⁷⁹ . Some people trusted the scientific process and the messaging from health organizations, while others were skeptical due to political influence or misinformation ¹⁸⁰ . Leaders who took strong, science-based stances were often met with opposition from those who felt their personal freedoms were being restricted.
	Evidence and Expertise	Trust in messaging increases when it is backed by credible sources, data, and expertise. Relying on well-researched facts and expert opinions helps reinforce the credibility of the message ¹⁸¹ .
Personal Trust and Social Networks	Trust in Personal Networks	For many individuals, their trust in the pandemic messaging was shaped not just by experts but by the people around them ¹⁸² . Family, friends, and social groups played a key role in interpreting and deciding which messages to trust ¹⁸³ . In communities with strong local ties or shared beliefs, people were more likely to follow advice from people they trusted personally rather than from government sources or experts ¹⁸⁴ .

	Trust in Institutions	Trust in institutions like the CDC, WHO, or local health departments was a major factor in following the guidelines. In places where people had a higher degree of institutional trust, adherence to public health measures tended to be higher ¹⁸⁵ . On the other hand, in areas where institutional trust was low, people were more likely to ignore or challenge recommendations
Impact of Messaging on Behavior	Fear vs. Empowerment	The way messages were framed—either in terms of fear or empowerment—affected people's behavior ¹⁸⁶ . Messages that focused on fear, emphasizing the threat of the virus, sometimes led to heightened anxiety and resistance to restrictions, while messages that focused on collective responsibility or personal empowerment (e.g., wearing masks to protect others) tended to be more positively received ¹⁸⁷
	Behavioral Changes and Adaptation	People adapted to COVID-19 measures based on how messages resonated with them ^{119,172} . The focus on hygiene, wearing masks, social distancing, and later, getting vaccinated, was framed as part of social responsibility. However, some of these messages didn't translate well to all communities, particularly those that felt marginalized or that had experienced previous distrust in government policies ¹⁸⁸

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a unique confluence of personal and public health challenges, forcing individuals to make difficult decisions about their health while highlighting systemic inequalities and the need for global cooperation in responding to health crises. The intersection of personal and public health challenges in a COVID-19 world highlights the delicate balance between individual rights and collective responsibility. In the early stages of the pandemic, information about COVID-19 was rapidly evolving. Public health focuses on the health of populations, seeking to prevent disease, promote wellness, and ensure equitable access to healthcare. This sometimes led to conflicting messages, particularly about preventive measures like mask-wearing, social distancing, or the effectiveness of certain treatments. Inconsistent

messaging from health authorities, government leaders, and media outlets created confusion.

The policy quandary at the heart of the crisis was not just about statistics or public health models—it was about the impact on real people, with complex lives with varying concerns, making it an intensely personal matter for many. For many, the question becomes: How do we balance the lives at risk from the virus with the financial and mental health challenges caused by prolonged restrictions? An individual who loses their job or faces financial instability due to restrictions might argue for a quicker reopening, prioritizing economic recovery. However, someone with vulnerable health conditions or who has lost loved ones to the virus might support stronger lockdowns to preserve public health, even at the cost of economic hardships.

Striking the right balance between individual responsibilities and collective responsibilities is a dynamic and evolving challenge in the face of pandemics. It involves navigating complex ethical, legal, and social considerations. Future pandemic preparedness must focus on building trust, equity, and flexibility, while also ensuring the protection of both individual freedoms and public health.

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