

Six pandemic profiles identified in study of public's response to guidance

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Researchers investigating the public response to official COVID-19 guidance say people can be split into six distinct groups determined by the way they search for, follow and act upon official advice.

The profiles have been identified by [social scientists](#) at the University of Leeds based on their perception of risk, shared attitudes, values and experiences of the virus.

While most people were found to be following [guidance](#), others do not understand it, do not trust it, or ignore it completely—meaning that official messaging is not reaching a significant minority of people across the country.

The researchers say there is not a one-size-fits-all message that can be effectively addressed to the entire public—and it would make sense to adopt a [coronavirus](#) communications strategy that considers the differences between the groups.

The Communicating the Pandemic project, which is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the UKRI rapid response to the pandemic, was launched in August this year.

Some 3,111 people were questioned as part of the study about their attitudes to risk, politics, voting behaviour and understanding of COVID-19.

Respondents were questioned on socio-demographic factors including: age, disability, education, ethnicity, gender and life-satisfaction; personality traits such as attitudes to risk taking and sociability; political leaning and previous voting behaviour; experience of, understanding of and proximity to COVID-19; accessing official information about the virus, and activities with different levels of exposure risk.

From the results, the research team was able to identify common patterns within the responses, which led to the development of the six categories or personas.

Principal investigator Stephen Coleman, Professor of Political Communication from the School of Media and Communication, said: "The positive news is that most people in the United Kingdom are accessing, making sense of and acting in compliance with the official

guidance. But some—amounting to millions across the national population—are not."

The six groups

The groups are characterised by their distinctive experiences and attitudes towards risk in the context of the pandemic.

Individualist risk-takers

- Mainly under 44
- Politically left-leaning
- Mainly live in London
- Highest number of positive cases
- Largest number of key workers

This group represents 12% of the population. These are individualists in their general outlook and how they respond to official COVID-19 advice. These values lead them to reject imposed regulations. They seek out guidance and believe they understand it. They say the government is advising as best it can but are highly critical of messaging. They strongly believe guidance should be flexible. They are overwhelmingly confident they can stay safe, despite high exposure to risks through work—but are much more likely than any other group to have engaged in high-risk behaviour such as car sharing or staying overnight with a romantic partner. They know their actions are often inconsistent with official advice.

Non-information-seeking sceptics

- Mostly age 18-34
- Many are semi-skilled and manual workers, or students

- Politically centrist

This group represents 20% of the population. They are least concerned about risk, preferring to make their own judgements and decisions. They believe the risks posed by the pandemic are exaggerated and are sceptical about official guidance. They are least likely to seek information with half choosing to avoid it, feeling overwhelmed by too much information. They find it difficult to make sense of official guidance and almost half are not sure they know what to do to stay safe. Some 39% do not social distance, being unconvinced there is a genuine risk, and experience the most difficulty with wearing [face masks](#), keeping workplaces ventilated, keeping their hands and face clean, and following safety guidelines in workplaces, shops and businesses.

Information-seeking rule-followers

- Most aged over 55; 19% over 65
- Mainly Conservative voters
- Mostly live outside London

This group represents 20% of the population. They tend to feel they are in control of their lives but see COVID-19 as a direct personal threat. They stay informed, seeking updates wherever they can find them. They understand and tend to trust official advice and follow the rules scrupulously. They are most likely to believe government ministers are straight talking. Information-seeking rule-followers are highly unlikely to engage in risky activities and find it easier than any other group to avoid them.

- Complacently confident
- Mostly middle- aged
- Most live outside London
- Very right wing, but not likely to vote

- Many are unemployed

This group represents 19% of the population. They want to make up their own minds and follow their own rules about the pandemic's risks. Many avoid COVID-19 updates and very few have seen advice from politicians or scientists, often saying they don't trust it. They tend not to know people who have had COVID-19 or feel particularly vulnerable to the virus themselves. They are overwhelmingly confident of staying safe. This group is less interested in how to tackle the problem than whether there is a problem—and a third do not see the point of wearing a face mask.

Information-seeking critics

- Usually over 25
- Live outside London
- A quarter suffer with anxiety or depression
- Politically left wing or very left wing

This group represents 16% of the population. Members are among the most concerned about the pandemic's risks and are unlikely to engage in risky behaviour, with 93% wearing a mask. They strongly believe in rules but want the rule-making process to more inclusive and accountable. They stay updated, mainly following scientists—they find government guidance insufficient and hard to comprehend or trust. They say they can stay safe if they have the right information but are not confident the authorities are providing it. Nine out of 10 think politicians and scientists are saying different things.

Experientially risk-averse

- Most aged over 45; many aged over 55

- Mostly live outside London
- Usually retired, unemployed or homeworkers
- 47% have an acute long term health condition
- Politically slightly left leaning

This group represents 12% of the population. Members have come into close contact with the virus, which has scared them into taking official advice very seriously. Most either know someone who has contracted COVID and a quarter know someone who has died. Many live with someone who is very vulnerable to infection. They seek out official advice as a matter of practical necessity, usually from the NHS or government websites, and are reasonably confident they understand it—but they think the guidance changes too often. They are committed face mask users, but half will never be in public situations where they need to use them.

Professor Coleman said: "Attempts to address the public as a homogeneous recipient of information and guidance relating to the pandemic are bound to fail.

"There is a need for a communication strategy in response to the current crisis that takes account of divergence between distinct population groups, while opening up space so that people holding particular perspectives can engage with others who have different attitudes and experiences.

"This will help to engender a clearer public sense of the civic principles underlying the national response to the pandemic."

More information: Communicating the Pandemic—Reports:
ahc.leeds.ac.uk/media/doc/communicating-pandemic

Provided by University of Leeds

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