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Implicit and Explicit Cognitive Processes Associated with COVID-19 Mask-Usage Decisions

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Abstract

Simple, non-pharmaceutical health interventions (e.g., masks) could prevent avoidable COVID-19 deaths (Reiner et al., 2020). Why do some still refuse to wear masks? People may find it easier to rely on implicit, prior knowledge to avoid needing to inhibit new, competing knowledge (e.g., heuristics; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Not only does knowledge impact decision making, but from a contextualized deficit framework, knowledge should interact with context to promote differential health decisions (Allum et al., 2008). A computer mouse-tracking paradigm evaluated how context (e.g., trust-in-experts; incidence rate) and germ knowledge impacted cognitive conflict driving mask-usage decisions. Results indicated that increased trust-in-experts, higher positive COVID-19 incidence rates, as well as accurate germ theories promoted mask-usage endorsement, which also reduced cognitive conflict between knowledge about new and old public-health mask guidelines. Contextual factors may help remediate the cognitive stress associated with inhibiting prior inaccuracies in favor of updated, scientific mask recommendations.