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CoViDisgust: Language Comprehension at the Intersection of a Global Pandemic and Individual Disgust Sensitivity

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Abstract

Recent research suggests that an individual's disgust sensitivity affects language comprehension and correlates with political attitudes. Importantly, disgust sensitivity is not a stable measure and can be manipulated dynamically. We investigated the effect of the ongoing pandemic on language processing in a word rating and lexical decision study. Each participant was first exposed to either headlines portraying CoViD-19 as a serious disease or those downplaying it. The results showed an interaction between person-based factors, inherent word characteristics, and the participants' responses. After reading headlines emphasizing the threat of CoViD-19, easily disgusted participants considered the least disgusting words more disgusting. Further, political views played a role. More liberal participants rated the words lower for disgust in the downplayed condition but higher in the severe condition than their more conservative peers. The results of this study shed new light on how the media's stance on the pandemic may affect the public's response.