The effect of visual representations of SARS-Cov-2 on the U.S. public's fear and disgust

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Abstract

The widespread use of images of the SARS-CoV-2 establishes a visual brand for the virus and helps raise public awareness; yet some of these images can evoke disgust among viewers and polarize their fear along lines of existing feelings toward the disease. This study selected 21 images of SARS-Cov-2 produced by the CDC, NIAID, and third-party illustrators with varying visual appearance. Using an experiment with a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults (N=500), we found that the images evoking the highest level of disgust backfire among who are least concerned about COVID and cause less fear than visually pleasing images.

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