Politics, fear, and persuasion: an analysis of institutional advertisements during the pandemic

Política, miedo y persuasión: análisis de anuncios institucionales en tiempos de pandemia

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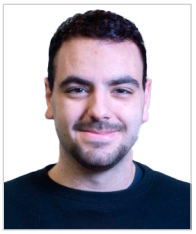

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Abstract:

This research examines institutional advertisements disseminated during the COVID-19 pandemic for the purpose of obtaining and analysing the main features of the spots, which were combined in order to create a symbology of fear. A mixed approach involving content and discourse analysis has been used, in which a total of 19 advertisements were selected and decoded based on their metadata, explicit content or formal features, framing, and advertising objectives. More than half of the spots use fear as a persuasive factor, and concern is instilled by incorporating common features of aesthetics and symbolism in terms of form, content, and expressive resources. This study clearly demonstrates that due to the absence of other frameworks, fear was used as the preferred emotion for engaging in political persuasion during the pandemic, and that a climate of fear was created by using combined features aimed at spreading thanatophobia, or the fear of disease.

Keywords:

Political communication, crisis communication, COVID-19, institutional advertisements, persuasion.

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Resumen:

Esta investigación analiza los spots institucionales durante la pandemia de COVID-19, obteniendo y examinando los principales elementos que confluyeron para construir una simbología del miedo. Se emplea un enfoque que combina el análisis de contenido y el análisis del discurso. Se seleccionan 19 anuncios y se decodifican en función de sus metadatos, su contenido explícito o sus elementos formales, su marco o framing y sus objetivos publicitarios. Más de la mitad de los spots emplean el miedo como herramienta persuasiva y el temor es infundido por elementos estéticos y simbólicos comunes en cuanto a la forma, al fondo y a los recursos expresivos. Se demuestra que, en ausencia de otros marcos, el miedo tuvo un lugar predilecto como emoción empleada para la persuasión política durante la pandemia y que dicha atmósfera de temor fue construida con elementos compartidos orientados a expandir la tanatofobia o el temor a la enfermedad.

Palabras clave:

Comunicación política, comunicación de crisis, COVID-19, anuncios institucionales, persuasión.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic required an unprecedented communication effort from governments and public institutions, as they were faced with one of the biggest health crises in contemporary history, which led to accelerated changes in many aspects of life (Puebla-Martínez and Vinader-Segura, 2021). As the media was confronted with a worldwide drama, an uncertain situation, and a bleak outlook (Castañeda and Ramos, 2020), a fundamental role was given to crisis communication and public relations in connecting the three actors who interact in the public and political realm: the media ecosystem; political institutions; and citizens (Wolton, 1991; Castillo, Moreno and Capriotti, 2020).

There were three main areas where public communication played a key role in the complex and hybrid communicative ecosystem (Chadwick, 2013): explaining what was happening in relation to an event that was unknown to the public; disseminating educational information to prevent new infections; and persuading the audience to make certain changes in attitude towards complying with the new and extraordinary social and health measures, such as the need to reduce social contact and strictly obey the rules of confinement.

Given this situation regarding health, politics, and society, the present research focuses on the institutional advertisements broadcast during the pandemic. It also starts from the premise that spreading fear was one of the general approaches taken by the media and politicians during the crisis phase of the pandemic (Moreno, Contreras and Román, 2021; Orbegozo and González-Abrisketa, 2021).

Specifically, an analysis was made of the symbolic construction of fear in the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain through the institutional communication of autonomous regional governments, as well as the adverts they broadcast during the first waves of the pandemic. As such, this study has obtained and contextualised the components that were used to develop the aforementioned semiotics of fear. This research is clearly justified by the fact that although fear has been used in other political and social contexts, an unprecedented state of fear and anxiety was generated during the pandemic (Torrente et al., 2020), due to *infoxication* and the proliferation of fake news (O'Connor and Murphy, 2020), as well as the high-impact messages used by public institutions themselves to make certain requests of the public and explain the development of the health crisis.

1.1. The politics of fear and persuasion

Fear is an instrument that instinctively puts people on guard against the possibility of change (Punset, 2008), which has been present in all cultures and eras in which human beings have inhabited the earth (Korstanje, 2010). Vicente Domínguez (2003, p. 666) defines it as an emotion that is "more or less transient, which appears when a danger that is real, apparent, specific, or unspecified is perceived or presumed, and which can be felt individually or collectively". On the other hand, Vera-García (2015, p. 35) limits its definition to the following: "an emotional reaction to a danger recognised as such in a conscious state of mind".

Numerous studies have tried to explain the effect of using fear on human attitude and behaviour (Rodríguez-Andrés, 2011). The main studies on this issue were carried out in the 20th century, and in the 1990s Kim Witte (1992, 1994) developed a synthesis method that focuses on determining the factors that make an appeal to fear effective and can be used to guide the masses (Cárdenas and Lozano, 2020) and even control and discipline the members of a given society (Orbegozo and González-Abrisketa, 2021).

Carlos Bührle (2004) brings us closer to one of the eminent philosophers who related fear to political power: Thomas Hobbes. According to Bührle (2004, p. 10), "Hobbes knew that fear paralyses and makes one afraid", and fear is "the most potent and necessary political emotion, the great educator of an untamed and untrustworthy humanity". Another classic author is Montesquieu. Contrary to all of the foregoing reflections, this philosopher developed theories regarding despotism as a type of arbitrary government built on fear and mutual distrust (Keane, 2002).

In this regard, two of the modern authors who reflect on the three-way relationship between legitimacy, fear, and power are Corey Robin (2009) and Michel Foucault (2009). According to Robin, political fear builds a foundation that leads to the domination of underlying controversies. Moreover, it is an "elite" instrument used to govern resistance arising in the social sphere (Korstanie, 2010), given that the world is a theatre of every kind of danger, evil and threat (Boucheron and Robin, 2015). Foucault (1991) identified an additional aspect in the relationship between fear and power in modern times. For the French philosopher, the aforementioned emotion can be produced and reproduced by political agents of the government to establish control and supervision, and to improve society in general (Debrix and Barder, 2009).

In contemporary terms, we might speak of the dual factor of fear-control regarding society. For Parra (2020), the model of governance based on the use of fear for social control makes sense during catastrophes, crises, or collective disasters, with the aim of guaranteeing peaceful co-existence. Nevertheless, social upheavals arising from multidimensional causes continue to generate intense debate among jurists, philosophers, and social scientists. These discussions range from libertarian positions

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that support civil disobedience and the right to resist oppression, to neoconservative perspectives that justify state violence in specific circumstances as an undisputed means of upholding the system (Olha, et al., 2020).

In addition, there are several paradigmatic examples of the appeal to fear in the political sphere, such as the following: the 2005 UK general elections (Dean, 2005); the 2016 Colombian referendum on the peace accords (Cardona-Zulueta and Londóño-Álvarez, 2018); and the rhetoric used by Donald Trump in the 2016 election campaign (Ayala-Sánchez, 2017). Other events in recent history have also enabled the analysis of this phenomenon, which connects the generation of fear with political persuasion, an example of which is the attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11 (Van Der Pijl, 2016), or the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom (Milam, 2016).

Specifically, in the emerging field risk communication during health crises, appeals to fear in certain contexts could be effective in making citizens more receptive to the recommendations of public administrations (Altheide, 2010). However, there is an ongoing debate between those who believe that fear acts as a motivator and encourages positive attitudinal changes, and those who argue that the anxiety generated by such messages leads to denial and avoidance of the message (Ordoñana, Amor and Olivares, 2000).

The fact is, the use of fear by institutions in times of health crises, such as the one addressed in this article, is nothing new. In this regard, a long list of health crises prior to the COVID-19 pandemic could be cited, examples of which include the illness caused by toxic canola oil (1981), mad cow disease (2000), the spread of Influenza A (2011), and poisoning by the E. coli bacteria (2011) (Rodríguez-Andrés, 2011; López-Villafranca, 2012).

1.2. Institutional advertising and the use/communicative value of spots

Institutional advertisements, or spots, which are used in various communication campaigns, belong to the field of institutional advertising (Santiago-Barnés, Ortega-Jarrín and Carpio-García, 2016). This phenomenon has been defined in various ways throughout history (Feliu, 2009; Cortés, 2011). For Professor Elisa Moreu-Carbonell (2005), institutional advertising is a public communication instrument focused on persuasion, generally one-directional, created by government administrations, and aimed at the public. Therefore, this type of communication transmits ideas rather than products, and is linked to the educational and socialising role of the state.

According to the classification of issues related to institutional advertising, offered by Moragas (2005), the spots broadcast during the COVID-19 pandemic by public administrations combined an overriding social function with the promotion of safety and risk prevention. Feliu (2009) offers her own classification of institutional communication, taking the Infoadex database as a starting point, and looking specifically at the objectives of the campaigns. Thus, this author has identified four types of institutional advertising:

1. Corporative advertising: To provide information about programmes related to public policies, or to present projects or the results of public management.
2. Commercial advertising: To promote the consumption of specific products, attract foreign investment, and promote tourism, among other objectives.

3. Political Advertising: To provide information about electoral campaigns.
4. Social Advertising: To explain citizens' rights and obligations, and to encourage change in certain habits.

Furthermore, advertisements are one of the most effective mechanisms with the greatest potential in the aforementioned institutional campaigns, as they combine image, movement, light, and sound, and they do so in an aesthetic manner (Martínez-Pastor and Vizcaíno-Laorga, 2008). In fact, image is one of the most appropriate communicative languages for expressing suffering and pain (Linde-Navas, 2005). On the other hand, it is also capable of generating emotion, beliefs, and even a response from the one who views the images (Cardenas and Lozano, 2020). Moreover, they provide the receiver with "the potential to generate new ways of understanding and making sense of events, reflecting on them, and developing coping strategies through the construction of new meanings and discourse" (Echeverry and Herrera, 2005, p. 141).

In general, the spots are approximately 25-30 seconds long (Baeza and Martín, 2019) and are perfectly adapted to the register and language of television, although they are now disseminated through other communication channels such as social media. The most important advantages of these adverts are the following: the broadcaster fully controls the focus and dissemination of the message; these spots allow a combination of features such as image, sound, colour, visual effects, and special effects; and finally, the messages are disseminated through mass media channels with the potential to reach large audiences (Santiago-Barnés, Ortega-Jarrín and Carpio-García, 2016; Degrado, 2005).

1.3. Objectives, hypotheses, and research questions

The overall objective of this study is to analyse the use of fear and its importance in institutional communication, in addition to its influence as a persuasive resource and an emotion that was generated through advertising disseminated during the health crisis in Spain (Objective 1). In this regard, the aim is to outline the symbolism of fear by describing the main components of which it is comprised (Objective 2). The ultimate goal is to obtain information on the presence of fear in comparison with other frameworks or emotional frames, as well as the aesthetic, formal, and symbolic components common to the spots that use fear, and the metaphors with the greatest presence in the sample.

Consequently, this study is based on the following hypotheses:

H1: Fear is the most common emotion induced by the spots in the sample, and the messages revolve around this feeling. In cases where it is not the main message, fear is present in most of the adverts, at least in a way that is secondary or implied.

H2: Fear is created through shared symbology in most of the adverts, through the use of oral, visual, symbolic, or metaphorical elements.

2. Method

The main reference used for this research is the view set forth by Silvia Gutiérrez (2015), who has developed a crossover and multidisciplinary outlook for the observation of institutional advertisements. Gutiérrez (2015) argues that electoral adverts, which are closely related to institutional spots, should be examined from various perspectives:

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1. Rhetorical-argumentative strategies, and argumentative resources (themes, ideas, etc.).
2. Language used (register, expressive turns of phrase, etc.).
3. Use of rhetorical devices (metaphor, comparison, repetition, use of irony, etc.).
4. Type of enunciation (e.g. subjective attributes of the sender).
5. Visual elements (e.g. visual metaphors).
6. Sound elements (effects, music, etc.).

On the other hand, Rodríguez, Garrido, and Ramos (2009) carried out a research study with a pre-determined sample of 241 communicative pieces, 73 of which were issued by the Spanish Government, 147 by regional governments, and the rest by municipal governments of Spanish capital cities. These authors used a qualitative approach involving content analysis with an ad-hoc strategy designed for the study, in which they focused on the following features:

1. Objectives of the spot based on its message.
2. Broadcaster identification and the use of voiceover.
3. Tone of the advertising message.
4. Identification of the issue addressed and classification of the receiver of the message.

Within this framework, the present study has been designed using a combined approach of content and discourse analysis (Van Dick, 2016). The first technique provides a more quantitative strategy, whereas the second takes a more interpretative approach, which allows the messages to emerge in context. As content analysis is deductive by nature, this makes it possible to scientifically examine the meanings and signifiers of any text; regarding discourse analysis, this tool is beneficial for unmasking the logic that operates beneath language (Vicente-Mariño, 2006).

In this regard, the following methodological process has been designed, which includes an initial phase of preliminary work (Steps 1 to 4), a second phase of fieldwork (Steps 5 and 6), and finally, a third phase of explanatory and interpretative work (Steps 7 and 8), as follows:

1. Define and circumscribe the object of study.
2. Define the criteria of the sample and the timeframe.
3. Search for adverts in different sources (institutional websites, social media channels such as YouTube or Twitter, etc.).
4. Design the data collection sheet according to criteria that is specific and scientific.
5. The research team will review and autonomously carry out the data collection.
6. Compare coincidence and divergence in the decoding of the data.
7. Achieve results according to predefined criteria.
8. Interpret and verify the findings according to the hypotheses and objectives stated above.

Moreover, a number of analytical criteria that are fundamental to the understanding of the study are as follows:

Firstly, the sample consisted of one advert per autonomous region or city (19 in total). As most of the autonomous regions published more than one piece, the sample consisted of the advertisements of those autonomous regions with the highest number of contagions and death, based on data from the Ministry of Health. The spot could have been broadcast directly by one of the departments of the institutions concerned (regional ministries), or by public organisations such as health and broadcasting services, and others. The search was carried out in the official archives of the institutional websites of the regional governments using phrases such as "announcement", "crisis", "COVID-19", etc. If this first step did not yield enough data, a manual search was carried out on social media such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

Secondly, three sheets were used for the data collection: the first was used to gather the "metadata" of each spot (autonomous region, health wave referred to, broadcast date, slogan or hashtag used, broadcaster, governing party or parties, duration, and link); the second sheet was used for information related to the content analysis (title of the campaign, gender of the people starring in the advert, estimated age, location of the narrative, typology of the voiceover, brief description of the content, etc.); the third sheet was used for the data that served as a guide in identifying the framework or emotional frame to which the spot refers (type of target, most important frame, evoked emotions or frames that were secondary, etc.).

Thirdly, following the classification set forth by Hidalgo and Rodríguez (2013), four types of advertisements were selected according to the type of aim in each case: Informative Adverts (to inform the audience in a way that is objective and non-judgmental); Educational Adverts (to transmit new knowledge); Institutional Adverts (to promote a positive image of the institution, its achievements, and successes); and Persuasive Adverts (to invite the audience to do something or to change attitudes, using a persuasive approach.

Finally, following framing theory (Van Gorp, 2007; Muñiz, 2015), four broad frameworks or frames were defined, which had already been identified in previous works linked to advertising or institutional communication, and suggested by studies related to the COVID-19 pandemic itself (Orbegozo and González-Abrisketa, 2021; Sotelo-González, Díaz-Arias and López-Frías, 2021): the frames include fear, responsibility/collaboration, hope, and other. The type of emotion suggested by each frame was simplified by categorising fear as negative and hope as positive; with regard to the dual frame of responsibility/collaboration, this is a neutral combination that depends on the context. Overall, it was especially useful for this study to find an antagonist emotion as powerful and negative as fear, in this case represented by hope.

Moreover, the very presence of the aforementioned frameworks in pandemic crisis communication was the subject of reflection in documents by public and non-profit institutions such as *la Escuela Andaluza de Salud Pública* [the Andalusian school of public health] (2020), the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (2020), and the Department of Global Communication of the United Nations (2020). These institutions highlighted the need to make greater use of messages that encourage collective and individual responsibility, warning of the overuse of fear in messages, and they suggested placing more emphasis on positive messages involving emotions such as hope as an alternative (Green et al., 2020; March, 2020).

In the present study, each spot has been placed in a specific group based on its main narrative or audio-visual features as follows:

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- Fear: advertisements that focus their message on negative consequences of the pandemic and explicitly refer to aspects such as death, illness, physical injury, etc.
- Responsibility/Collaboration: adverts that explicitly or implicitly call on the audience to take measures or actions, either individually or collectively, to overcome the effects of the pandemic.
- Hope: these spots talk positively about the future, conveying an optimistic and encouraging message, and their aim is to generate a feeling of hope and confidence.
- Other: this category includes any audio-visual piece that cannot be clearly placed into any of the previous groups.

2.1. Description of the sample

The sample is made up of 19 institutional advertisements: 17 from Regional Governments, and two from Autonomous Cities (see Table 1). A total of 89.4% of the adverts pertain to the first three waves of the pandemic (the most critical moments of the pandemic in terms of infections and deaths), with only two spots that were broadcast outside this period.

Table 1. Sample metadata

Autonomous Region	Wave	Publication date	Title	Issuing Body (Regional Governments if not otherwise stated)	Running time	Link
Andalusia	3rd	22/01/21	*#CumpleTuParte*	Junta de Andalucía	0:45	https://youtu.be/6wl54egQ9oM
Aragon	1st	18/03/20	*Coronavirus*	Gobierno de Aragón	0:19	https://youtu.be/6cVrkwtgYvY
Principality of Asturias	2nd	20/11/20	*Pïensa*	Gobierno del Principado de Asturias	0:21	https://youtu.be/8C1UQkkL4gc
Balearic Islands	2nd	4/12/20	*Salvem Vides*	Govern Illes Balears	0:31	https://youtu.be/Y-32HMDhZKE
Canary Islands	2nd	13/08/20	*La* última *copa*	Gobierno de Canarias	0:47	https://youtu.be/bA9Pc9AzzKQ
Cantabria	5th	22/7/21	*No te pierdas nada*	Gobierno de Cantabria	0:39	https://youtu.be/TNuhz99k5BI
Castilla-La Mancha	2nd	14/09/20	*Quédate en casa*	Departamento de Educación	0:56	https://youtu.be/GKJYnNKRK8YY
Castilla and Leon	2nd	20/09/20	*Sabes cómo evitarlo*	Junta de Castilla y León	0:44	https://youtu.be/L4ZKCz4DJLI
Catalonia	1st	28/07/20	*Qui ens havia de dir*	Generalitat de Catalunya	0 :20	https://youtu.be/v7GJNKvpLrk

Valencian Community	1st	23/06/20	*Si la lías, nos la lías a todos #AmbPrudencia*	Generalitat Valenciana	1:21	https://youtu.be/u3x2N9E9Jks
Extremadura	3rd	11/01/21	*#VueltaAlCole con seguridad*	Junta de Extremadura	1:46	https://youtu.be/yfjaVS6j21Y
Galicia	1st	20/5/20	*Usa máscara #Sentidiño*	Xunta de Galicia	0:21	https://youtu.be/sXk4wW2ioD4
La Rioja	1st	13/4/20	*La Rioja Contrataca*	Gobierno de La Rioja	2:17	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTFOFq7nLuY
Community of Madrid	2nd	17/11/20	*#NoTeSaltes LaVida*	Gobierno de la Comunidad de Madrid	0:20	https://youtu.be/-iec3mWybYM
Murcia	2nd	20/11/20	*#LaMascarilla Siempre*	Gobierno de Murcia	0:21	https://youtu.be/1KfCvyhOh0M
Navarre	2nd	22/12/20	*Con tu compromiso lo conseguiremos* ¡Vamos, *Aurrera!*	Gobierno de Navarria	0:30	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQlDiGtaIGU&feature=youtu.be
Euskadi	2nd	19/11/20	*Manos, mascarilla, distancia*	Gobierno Vasco	0:30	https://youtu.be/FZsMYhrjLEY
Autonomous City of Ceuta	3rd	30/3/201	*Nueva campaña de….*	City council and RTVE	1:18	https://youtu.be/WZX_ExUEAM0
Autonomous City of Melilla	6th	25/11/21	*La Consejería de Salud Pública…*	Department of health and Faro TV	1:17	https://youtu.be/-51W-Pw_w4w

Source: prepared by the authors

Based on the information reflected in the sample data, the following observations have been made:

- Some key dates in the calendar regarding a sharp increase in social contact are especially relevant when broadcasting advertisements, including the following: Christmas, Easter, summer holidays, and the "back to school" period.
- The length of the adverts varies, with an average of 49 seconds. More than half (10) are between 20 and 40 seconds. Only 5 spots are longer than one minute. The most common lengths are approximately 20 seconds (5 spots), and 30 seconds (3 spots). This last point is in line with the traditional lengths of television adverts, yet it contradicts the latest research on the effect of advertising, which argues that communicative inputs longer than 20 seconds are more effective because they improve the memorability of the brand and the message (Martín, Reinares and Reinares, 2016).

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- The longest advert (2'17") is "*La Rioja Contrataca*", which could be considered a specific example of the antithesis of using fear in institutional advertising. The spot capitalises on the idea of hope by explicitly mentioning this feeling. The advert is narrated by children's voices, and although it does not develop a story as such, as it shows a succession of healthcare and hospital images, it places the story in delivery rooms, paediatric services, and geriatric settings, and it displays especially hopeful faces.
- Among the titles of the adverts, what is striking is that the messages are short, forceful and assertive, with specific requests and even orders ("Wear a mask", "Stay at home", etc.). In this way, the appellative or conative function of language (Grimaldi, 2009) is used, according to each institution's aim of having their ideas accepted by the audience, which often involves changes in their behaviour, attitudes, or rules. Likewise, implicit or explicit allusions are made to the feeling of loss, with slogans like "Don't miss anything", "The last drink", "Don't skip life", and "Save lives".
- In general, realistic environments and situations are recreated (hospitals, health centres, schools, etc.), and the stories are narrated by people of different genders and ages (see Table 2). Likewise, only three advertisements use animation, and most of them include voiceovers (13 out of 19), with a greater presence of male voices (9 male narrators and 4 female narrators).

3. Results

3.1. The presence of fear and other emotional frames

Table 2 provides a quick and descriptive look at the main variables analysed in the sample. What is striking, among other issues, is the fact that three autonomous regions have chosen to make animated videos or to channel the message through cartoons starring non-gendered characters. This decision is in line with the objective pursued, as the three videos have an informative and didactic focus, and two are aimed at children and young people.

With regard to the age of the characters who are the protagonists of the stories, or who describe the cases, there is a tendency to mix characters of different ages, probably in order for the heterogeneous receivers to identify with the characters and feel they are being spoken to. Moreover, two of the groups have a considerable presence among the characters: young people and seniors.

Table 2. Content analysis: variables of context

	Title and Autonomous Region (Spain)	Protagonists' variables		Location	Voice-over (gender)	Type of Advert or objective	Frame, framing, or main emotion	Frame, framing, or secondary emotion
		Gender	Age					
1	Andalusia *#CumpleTuParte*	Misc.	Misc.	Misc.	Male	Persuasive	Fear	Responsibility/ collaboration
2	Aragon *Coronavirus*	Animation		Editing	-	Educational	-	-
3	Principality of Asturias *Piensa*	Misc.	Misc.	Misc.	Male	Persuasive	Responsibility/ collaboration	Fear
4	Balearic Islands *Salvem Vides*	Misc.	Misc.	Misc.	-	Persuasive	Responsibility/ collaboration	Fear and Hope
5	Canary Islands *La* última *copa*	Misc.	Young people	Misc.	Male	Persuasive	Fear	-
6	Cantabria *No te pierdas nada*	Misc.	Young people	Misc.	Male.	Persuasive	Responsibility/ collaboration	-
7	Castilla-La Mancha *Quédate en casa*	Misc.	Young people	Misc.	Male	Educational	-	Fear
8	Castilla and Leon *Sabes cómo evitarlo*	Women	Young people	Hospital	Male	Persuasive	Fear	-
9	Catalonia *Qui ens havia de dir*	Misc.	Misc.	Misc.	Female	Persuasive	Hope	Responsibility/ collaboration
10	Valencian Community *Si la lías, nos la lías a todos - #AmbPrudencia*	Misc.	Misc.	Beach	Male	Persuasive	Responsibility/ collaboration	Fear
11	Extremadura *#VueltaAlCole con seguridad*	Animation		Editing	-	Educational	-	-
12	Galicia *Usa máscara #Sentidiño*	Animation		Editing	Male and Female	Educational	-	Responsibility/ collaboration

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13	La Rioja *La Rioja Contrataca*	Misc.	Misc.	Hospital	Female.	Persuasive	Hope	Other (War)
14	Community of Madrid *#NoTeSaltesLaVida*	Men	Seniors	Misc.	-	Persuasive	Fear	Responsibility/ collaboration
15	Murcia *#LaMascarilla Siempre*	Misc.	Adults	Misc.	Male	Educational	-	Responsibility/ collaboration
16	Navarre *Con tu compromiso lo conseguiremos* ¡Vamos, *Aurrera!*	Women	Adults	Private household	Male and Female	Persuasive	Hope	Responsibility/ collaboration
17	Euskadi *Manos, mascarilla, distancia*	Misc.	Adults	Hospital	-	Persuasive	Fear	Responsibility/ collaboration
18	Autonomous City of Ceuta *Nueva campaña de….*	Men	Seniors	Recording studio	-	Persuasive	Fear	Responsibility/ collaboration
19	Autonomous City of Melilla *La Consejería de Salud Pública…*	Misc.	Misc.	Misc.	Male	Persuasive	Other	Responsibility/ collaboration

Source: prepared by the authors

On the other hand, although the locations in the sample are diverse, hospitals and places related to health services are the most common. Moreover, the general trend is to use voiceovers, either in whole or in part, to narrate a given story (13 of the 19 videos), or to make an appropriate appeal. The voice used is generally male with all the traditional attributes such as a low tone, slow rhythm, solemn register, etc. This type of male voice is present in most of the spots in which the message is conveyed by inducing fear in the receiver. Only two adverts use a female voice, one of which is that of a girl. Both of these videos use hope as a frame, or as the main emotion induced.

Leaving aside adverts of an educational nature, the sample focuses on those pieces that have a persuasive advertising objective (14), which is the type of advertisement that appears the most. In reference to the main frame or emotion evoked, fear is the most prevalent (one out of three advertisements). However, the present study found that two induced emotions can coexist in an advertising spot and, based on this concept, the most common framework is that of "responsibility/collaboration", which is present in 68% of the cases analysed (13 spots). Fear, on the other hand, is evoked in more than half of the sample analysed (10 advertisements), either as the first or second emotion detected. Hope is the emotion evoked the least (three pieces in the sample).

3.2. Symbology of fear: form, substance, and the extent of thanatophobia

This segment specifically analyses the nine spots that use fear as the first or second most commonly evoked sentiment as an emotional channel to convey the message. Thus, Table 3 is divided into two main sections to describe the sample, compiling features that refer to the form and substance of the institutional adverts.

The first question to be addressed is how the symbolism of fear is presented from a technical perspective, with regard to the physical, material, aesthetic, visual, and sound components used for the productions.

In this regard, short and realistic pieces are generally used, with powerful images and strong messages using male voices. The most common style of audio-visual language used is a message that directly addresses the audience: close-ups, protagonists or narrators looking directly at the camera, assertive messages, imperative and even threatening sentences, etc. The aesthetics of the videos are dark with dim lighting, depicting hospitals as places that are gloomy and unsettling. The diegetic sounds emitted by elements displayed on stage, as well as non-diegetic sounds added during the editing phase for effect or accompaniment, refer to emergency room aspects such as ambulances, sirens, etc., or to situations of uncertainty through the use of disturbing melodies, the beeping sounds of hospital machinery, etc. (see Figure 1).

On the other hand, beyond the common technical aspects used to produce the spots, it is important to address the substance of the question or meaning: Which ideas or symbols in the selected sample are used to generate fear?

In this regard, the emotion of fear is produced by directly or indirectly linking the COVID-19 virus to serious health consequences that can eventually lead to death. This approach symbolically creates a mental picture that the receiver relates to the following process: breaking the rules leads to spreading and acquiring the COVID-19 virus, and becoming seriously ill, which can result in serious consequences or death, either of oneself or a loved one (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Associations regarding the form and substance of the adverts

Source: prepared by the authors

In the sample analysed, one of main ideas presented is the concept of loss: the loss of well-being; of health, despite not having any previous illness; loved ones; interpersonal relationships; and the loss of certain ethics regarding compliance with the rules. In fact, the loss of something always implies a change and adaptation to a new context, which leads to a general state of unease about a new situation. In the most extreme case of losing life, it also places the receiver in the position of suddenly facing an emotionally painful and traumatic experience: death. Moreover, if it becomes a common occurrence, it can lead to a syndrome known as thanatophobia, which is extreme anxiety resulting from the fear of death (Uribe, Valderrama and López, 2011; Zilboorg, 2017).

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Table 3. Content-specific analysis of the spots that use fear to convey the message

	Autonomous Region and Title of the spot	Frame, framing, or main and secondary emotion	Synopsis and general aesthetics	Features that induce fear in the audience
1	Andalusia *#CumpleTuParte*	Fear and responsibility	Review of the "lesser evils" due to restrictions, yet the avoidance of "greater evils" as a result of slowing the spread of the coronavirus. Compilation of "lesser evils" caused by the restrictions, and the greater evils "caused by the spread of COVID-19. Close-ups, as well as short, fleeting shots, text in capital letters, violin music in the background, and the use of dimly lit or dark backgrounds in hospital settings.	Respirator in the operating room (serious health problems). The sound of a medical monitor (health problems). Operating room (health problems). Elderly woman in bed on a respirator (death of a mother). Empty streets, shops closed (social confinement).
3	Principality of Asturias *Piensa*	Responsibility and fear	Depiction of the virus as an enemy that is invisible, elusive, lethal, etc., by using the voiceover of a male narrator with an invitation to "fight" by saying, "We can't let it beat us". Dark contexts with dimly-lit shots, interspersed with images of the narrator looking at the camera, and shots of the hospital as well.	Sounds (non-diegetic) of ambulances (accident or emergency situation) and the sound of a medical monitor (health problems). Shots of intubated people (serious health problems) and patients separated by a glass partition (isolation and family separation).
4	Balearic Islands *Salvem Vides*	Responsibility, fear, and hope	At Christmas different people express their love of the seasonal festivities, and announce their regret at not celebrating them as usual. These are interspersed with images of people in hospital who are seriously ill, and other people talk about some of the pathologies and consequences of COVID-19. Protagonists: health care professionals who talk at the camera and ask the viewer to be responsible and prudent, in order to celebrate Christmas in the usual way the following year.	Two spaces are contrasted: the first is a dining room table depicting a family meal at Christmas; the second is a hospital setting with healthcare workers protected by wearing PPE, in addition to ICU equipment, ambulances, etc. Narrations are heard of actual cases of people who have fallen ill, along with images that show how they are treated. The accompanying music is slow, and background shots are dark, especially around the dinner table.

5	Canary Islands *La última copa*	Fear	During the first half of the advert you see young people enjoying a party without masks, interspersed with images of youth who are cheerful and jovial, along with joyous and festive music. In the second half, you see a young person lying on a hospital bed with mobility problems. The advert transmits abrupt change symbolised by the contrast between fun (a party) and physical suffering (a hospital stay), with the portrayal of a dimly-lit hospital.	The constant sound of a medical monitor (in the second part) can be heard, with beeping sounds alluding to vital signs (health problems). The main character seems to have difficulty walking (reduced mobility with the continuous need for assistance), and is supported by an adjustable walking frame The protagonist is shown with nasogastric tubes inserted into his stomach through the mouth, signs of pain, trembling hands, etc. (serious health problems). An attendant is shown, completely protected by Personal Protective Equipment (social isolation).
7	Castilla-La Mancha *Quédate en casa*	Fear	An adolescent speaks to the camera against a background that is completely black, and presents a situation: a young woman ignores her coronavirus symptoms and decides to go out into the street. The narrator gives a warning: "Whatever you decide to do has consequences". Non-professional, didactic video with joyful music, entirely starring young people.	Audio-visual item that plays with the ambiguity of the phrase, "Whatever you decide to do has consequences", with an open-ended meaning that ranges from suffering a long-term viral disease, to endangering the lives of loved ones.
8	Castilla and Leon *Sabes cómo evitarlo*	Fear	Presents the case of a young person with no previous illness who is stricken with COVID-19, and is now in the intensive care unit of a hospital. At the end, a health professional makes an appeal for responsibility. Close-up shots inside a hospital with emergency medical equipment: curtained exam rooms, tubes, catheters, ventilators, endotracheal tubes, monitors, etc. Shots of the hospital interior with poor lighting, unsettling music, narration with a male voice, and diegetic sounds of medical equipment.	The sounds of medical emergency equipment can be heard, along with the beeping sounds of a machine that monitors vital signs (serious health problems). Presentation of a specific case that exemplifies the dramatic deterioration of health in a short period of time (exemplary synecdoche). Depiction of healthcare workers completely protected by Personal Protective Equipment (social isolation).

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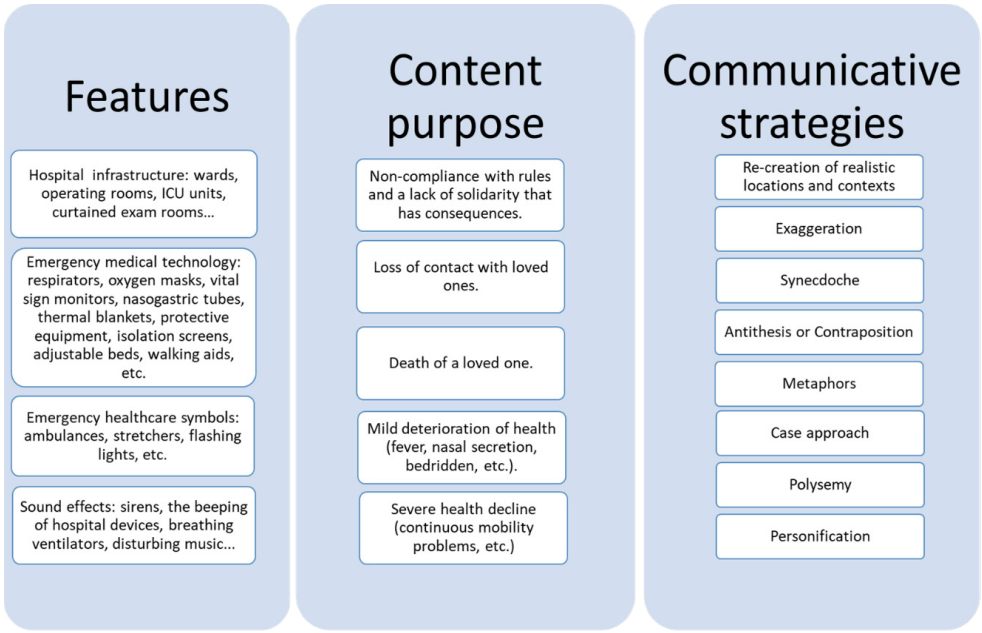
10	Valencian Community *Si la lías, nos la lías a todos* *#AmbPrudencia*	Responsibility and fear	A singer makes a musical narration of the "chaos" that results from not complying with the rules, contrasting a party on the beach with hospital images. There is a specific request to comply with the rules. Musical advert with colour images of people who comply with the rules, and black and white images of situations of non-compliance and hospital scenes. The latter images are slowed down to emphasise cases of non-compliance.	Portrayal of medical professionals with Personal Protective Equipment (social isolation). Bedridden patients accompanied by the sounds of hospital machinery, such as beeping sounds, alluding to vital signs (health problems). Patients lying face down and wearing breathing devices (oxygen masks and ventilators) with the sound of an accelerated pulse (serious health problems). Image of an empty bed (shown earlier in the scene), with the absence of medical equipment (indicating death).
14	Community of Madrid *#NoTeSaltes* *LaVida*	Fear and responsibility	An older person between 60 and 70 years of age is visited at home by relatives and refuses to ventilate the house to avoid letting the cold air come in. In the next frame, his wife is seen lying on a stretcher in an ambulance in serious condition.	An elderly woman is lying on a stretcher, covered with an isothermal blanket, attached to an oxygen respirator (indicating serious health problems leading to death); she is being transferred by ambulance directly to the doors of a hospital emergency room.
17	Euskadi *Manos, mascarilla, distancia*	Fear and responsibility	A patient is lying on a surgical table in an operating room, surrounded by five health professionals with Personal Protective Equipment, who move his body slightly. A sequence shot narrates a medical surgery in a realistic way by using diegetic sounds that emanate from the people and equipment in the scene.	A bedridden patient, apparently sedated or unconscious due to COVID-19, is being repositioned on the operating table by five professionals (serious health problems). Only diegetic sounds can be heard: orders or instructions from healthcare personnel, respiratory equipment (breathing ventilators), and the beeping sounds of machinery used to measure vital signs.
18	Autonomous City of Ceuta *Nueva campaña de….*	Fear and responsibility	Video in which phrases are written in capital letters against a black background with disturbing music. The text involves a series of questions directed at the viewer. At the end, a close-up of a person's face wearing a black mask appears, and the phrase "STOP THE PANDEMIC" is displayed.	The use of text emphasizes the general lack of protection against COVID-19, offering information related to those who have died from the illness, and associating the victims with mothers, fathers, siblings, etc.

Source: prepared by the authors

On the other hand, it can be inferred that the story and message are based on several literary devices, mainly those shown in Figure 2, which are generally used to enable the receiver to identify with the main characters and the actions proposed. Some examples include the following: common places and contexts are portrayed in a realistic way (beach parties, family meals, etc.); exaggeration is used by describing extreme cases, as if they were frequent (hospital admission with a subsequent death, complications in the hospital, etc.); personification of the virus, depicting it as an enemy that must and can be defeated; and lastly, individual responsibility and blaming the receiver is eventually pointed out through polysemy ("What you decide to do has consequences"), etc. In general, the spots analysed resort to constant comparison and contrast, delving into ideas such as the following: the consequences of compliance with the rules vs. non-compliance; people who follow the recommendations (supportive citizenship) vs. those who do not follow them (unsupportive citizenship); life vs. death; etc.

Figure 2. Outline of the main design components used to appeal to fear



Source: prepared by the authors

Finally, it is worth highlighting the three quintessential examples of using fear as a vehicle for the message. In all three cases, the aim is to explicitly and realistically expose the receiver to the fear of death, or to health deterioration.

In the example disseminated by the Region of Castilla and Leon ("*Sabes cómo evitarlo*"), the case consisted of a 33-year-old woman who had no previous illness, yet she was sedated, bedridden, intubated, and surrounded by emergency room

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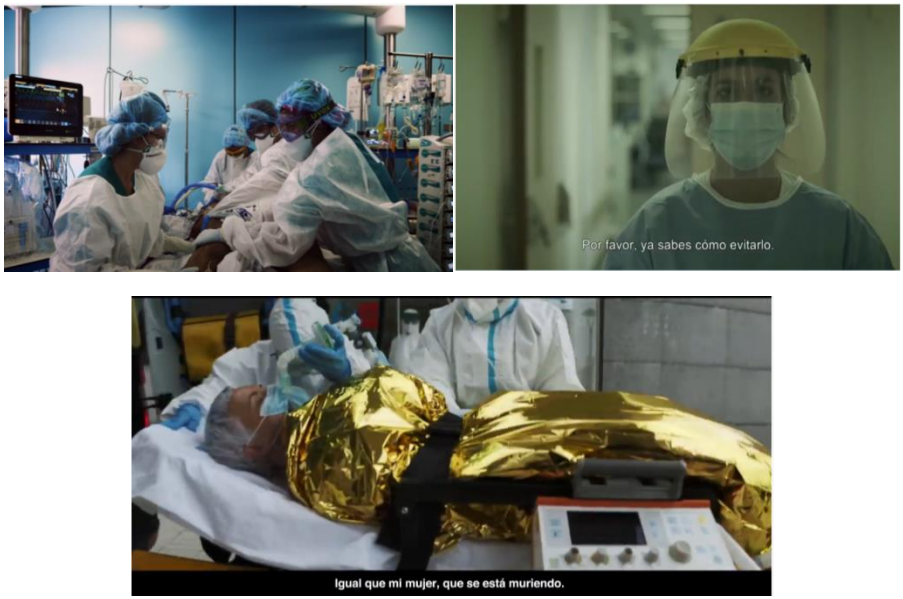
equipment. In the spot for the Community of Madrid, the attitude of an elderly man leads to the death of his wife. Finally, in the "minimalist" advert of the Basque regional government, which involves a sequence shot with a stationary camera, without oral or written narration, a surgery in an operating room is accurately and realistically portrayed, offering the viewer an unprecedented, exclusive, and original point of view of the hospital environment. In two of the three adverts, life is staged metaphorically through sounds that emanate from devices that simulate the sound of a heartbeat.

Figure 3. Still shots from the most exemplary adverts on the use of fear



Source: YouTube

Consequently, through the use of antithesis, or contraposition, the institutional adverts analysed help illustrate two parallel yet antagonistic worlds in the midst of the global health crisis: the first is life confronted by death; the second is the healthy and happy person, as opposed to the one who is physically disabled or socially isolated for having fallen ill. Thus, the opposing situations are placed in front of the mirror, both the good citizen and the bad citizen, with the latter being the one who does not follow the rules and acts without caution, which results in grave problems. In addition, these spots focus exclusively on presenting the most dramatic cases of falling ill with COVID-19. Furthermore, the fact of becoming ill is generally attributed to non-compliance with the rules, which are issued by the same public bodies that endorse the institutional advertising analysed in this study.

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4. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has discovered the presence of fear in institutional adverts broadcast during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it analyses the way in which the symbolism of fear was constructed and promoted by institutional communications. The authors surmise that fear played a key role as an allusive emotion, or as a sentiment that accompanied other frames or affective frameworks used as persuasive vehicles, such as responsibility (the most common emotion observed) or hope (H1).

In fact, the general atmosphere of unease or dread was constructed through certain features that are common to most of the spots that use fear, both in terms of form (technical design, visual, features, sound elements, etc.) and background (allusive metaphors, implicit messages, etc.) (H2).

Such features include the following list: short spots with high emotional impact; fleeting shots; close-ups in which the characters look at the camera and question the viewer; scenes of real cases; gloomy aesthetics and lighting; unsettling music; sounds of medical and emergency devices; medical equipment such as cardiac monitors, endotracheal tubes, wheelchairs, etc.; images of ambulances; re-created hospital scenes such as ICUs or operating rooms; male voiceovers with a grave tone; and more. All these features were used to construct a symbology in order to create widespread fear that the virus would propagate, as well as one's own infection and that of others.

In any case, the audio-visual language and implicit message of the communicative inputs contrast the opposing worlds of life and death, including heaven with well-lit shots of white or light tones, and hell, with hospital infrastructures that have dim lighting, which imbue the viewer with images of a funeral, or with the respective symbols of perdition enhanced through image, sound, and words. In addition, the narratives are replete with metaphors that construct the meaning of each world. On the one hand, life is embodied by family meals and parties with friends; and on the other hand, death is portrayed through the sound of ambulances and beeping heart monitors that convey the fear that they will suddenly stop working.

Furthermore, in achieving the objectives through persuasion, there is a clear absence of other frames such as hope, illusion, and solidarity. In short, using fear is perfectly legitimate, as long as one does not lie, manipulate, nor try to undermine other frames. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the tendency to use "psychological coercion" (Rodriguez, 2022) has been observed through the use of fear or threats to achieve certain political ends, which has led the population to take extreme positions.

Therefore, as it is difficult, or even impossible, to determine when it is necessary to alert the population of danger without alarming or arousing unnecessary fear (Rodríguez-Andrés, 2011), if these features are encouraged, this could imply moving away from legitimate political persuasion. Furthermore, this makes perfect sense, because in the face of threats such as death, human beings are capable of responding irrationally and anxiously, driven exclusively by emotion, a lack of reason, and fear (López-Quintas, 1998), often descending into passivity or indifference (Rangel-Abundis, 2005), and feeling that their freedom of choice is being curtailed. In fact, this study has revealed that this type of institutional communication was linked to a higher rate of negative feelings and increased depression (Santa-Cruz et al., 2022), and it contributed to the spread of irrational fears such as thanatophobia which, as mentioned above, is the persistent and unjustified fear of death, either one's own or that of a loved one. In summary, the use of communication based on fear also contributed indirectly to a situation in which the public now associates the healthcare environment with a pathway to death, rather than the affirmation of life and hope.

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Discussion and conclusions	Julen Orbegozo Terradillos and Oier San Martín Epalza
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Julen Orbegozo Terradillos

7. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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