

# To Enter or Not to Enter: Compliance with COVID-19-related Measures in the Spanish Bar-hopping Culture

*Salir de bares durante la COVID-19 en España: las metas individuales y el cumplimiento con las restricciones*

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## Key words

Attitudes

- COVID-19
- Social Norm Compliance
- Conjoint Experiment
- Goal Framing Theory

## Palabras clave

Actitudes frente a la COVID-19

- COVID-19
- Cumplimiento de normas sociales
- Experimento *conjoint*
- Teoría del encuadre de metas

## Abstract

This article examines how citizens prioritize different motivations for complying with anti-COVID measures, using Goal-Framing Theory (GFT), which posits a hierarchy of normative, gain, and hedonic goals. Using a conjoint experiment embedded in an online survey of a representative sample of 3291 Spanish respondents, the study analyzes people's preferences regarding entering a bar. Fieldwork was carried out during the Omicron wave of the virus in February 2022. The results indicate that the likelihood of entering a bar increases when the activity takes place outdoors, patrons wear masks when not consuming alcohol, and most individuals have received a booster dose. Fear of contracting the virus (risk perception) emerges as the main factor influencing the decision to enter a bar.

## Resumen

Este artículo analiza cómo la ciudadanía prioriza distintas motivaciones para cumplir con las medidas anti-COVID. Utilizando un experimento conjunto (*conjoint experiment* en inglés) incluido en una encuesta en línea representativa de la población española (N = 3291), examinamos las preferencias de las personas al serles propuesto el ejercicio de decidir si entrar en un bar. El trabajo de campo se realizó durante la ola de la variante ómicron (en febrero de 2022). Los resultados muestran que la probabilidad de entrar a un bar aumenta cuando el consumo se realiza al aire libre, cuando los clientes llevan mascarilla mientras no consumen y cuando la mayoría de la población ha recibido la dosis de refuerzo. De todas las motivaciones sugeridas, la más relevante es el miedo a contraer el virus.

## Citation

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens were required to comply with restrictive rules that limited their mobility and everyday activities. Adherence to these regulations required changes in daily routines and constrained the freedom to organize everyday life in many countries. In this context, a line of research emerged to analyze variations in citizens' behavior and the reasons why people comply with measures adopted by governments in response to the pandemic. Building on this literature, this study addresses two questions:

How did citizens prioritize their motivations for complying with COVID-19 regulations? Is there meaningful variation across regions?

Previous studies have analyzed citizens' propensity to comply with rules during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as social distancing, mask use, or mobility restrictions, using survey-based observational evidence from or multiple countries (Daoust *et al.*, 2021; Kooistra *et al.*, 2020; Harper *et al.*, 2021; Clark *et al.*, 2020; Reinders *et al.*, 2020).

However, survey-based studies have several limitations. According to Noone *et al.* (2021), in their review of 84 studies analyzing the determinants of compliance with social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, most articles lacked a well-developed theoretical framework, were subject to biases from non-representative samples or failed to identify specific causal mechanisms. Perhaps most importantly, these studies rely on self-reported behavior, which is often affected by social desirability bias due to

social pressure and prevailing norms of compliance (Daoust *et al.*, 2021; Hansen *et al.*, 2022).

Experimental designs are rare in this line of research, with only a few exceptions (Amat *et al.*, 2020; Goldstein and Wiedemann, 2021; Hamidi and Zandiatashbar, 2021). These studies employ relatively simple designs, limiting comparisons between control and treatment groups to a single dimension. As a result, they cannot simultaneously analyze explanatory factors influencing compliance.

This study contributes to the research in three ways. First, it employs a conjoint experimental design embedded in an online survey. Conjoint experiments permit the simultaneous estimation of multiple factors by presenting respondents with hypothetical choice scenarios between two options (Bansak *et al.*, 2021). Second, the analytical design draws on social contagion theory from legal sociology to examine how individuals adhere to social norms based on the behavior of others (Bicchieri *et al.*, 2020; Scherer and Cho, 2003). Finally, the study incorporates Goal-Framing Theory (Lindenberg and Steg, 2007) to include an additional set of relevant factors, such as hedonic, gain and norm-related goals.

Using evidence from a nationally representative online survey designed by the authors, with fieldwork conducted during the Omicron wave in February 2022, the results suggest that people's preferences are influenced by both social considerations and risk perception. Fear of contracting the virus emerges as the primary motivation for entering (or avoiding) a bar when the setting appears unsafe. Profit-seeking, based on a cost-benefit analysis, outweighs hedonistic motives and contributes to compliance with regulations. Finally, although regulations and restrictions varied across regional governments, the degree of compliance and

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citizens' preferences were similarly influenced by social and risk-related considerations across all regions, except for mask-wearing when not consuming, which was more important in Galicia and less so in Asturias. The implications of these findings for the literature on norm compliance are discussed in the conclusions section of these findings.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study builds on the concept of a social norm, understood as a shared standard of behavior accepted within society (Coleman, 1994; Burke and Young, 2011). Social norms are informal, generally unwritten rules that regulate, guide, and condition individuals' actions to facilitate coexistence and the regular, harmonious functioning of the communities in which they live. According to Bicchieri *et al.* (2020: 6), a norm is a "rule of conduct that prescribes or proscribes certain behavior for a specific group of people in a specific class of situations". Such a rule becomes a social norm when individuals believe that most people adhere to it and, as a result, consider it appropriate to follow. Both empirical and normative expectations influence whether others comply with the norm. Adherence to rules is also related to social contagion. Social contagion theory has been applied to the adoption of innovative practices by physicians (Burt, 1987), the diffusion of risk perceptions within communities (Scherer and Cho, 2003), and compliance with social norms (Bicchieri *et al.*, 2020).

Coleman (1994: 244 ff.) follows a different line of reasoning in his theory of social systems analysis. According to this author, norms are formed at the social (macro) level, even though they originate from a collection of individual (micro) actions aimed at achieving specific goals.

For a norm to fully develop, a transition from the micro to the macro level is necessary. When individuals' initial actions, driven by personal goals, produce more disadvantages than benefits due to credible sanctioning mechanisms, a social norm begins to form. This individualistic perspective is grounded in a cost-benefit analysis.

Our approach to understanding how citizens prioritize compliance with COVID-19 pandemic norms focuses on the goals guiding their decision-making. We draw on Goal-Framing Theory (Lindenberg, 2017; Lindenberg *et al.*, 2013, 2021), which posits that individuals act according to the goals that are most salient to them. According to Lindenberg (2017), three main goals compete for dominance: hedonic, gain, and normative. The hedonic goal seeks to maximize "feeling good in the moment", a self-centered focus that may distance individuals from broader social considerations. The gain goal involves a cost-benefit calculation, in which compliance with norms depends on whether the potential sanctions or risks outweigh the benefits of non-compliance. We argue that risk aversion, and the fear of losses more than the desire for gains (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982; Tversky and Kahneman, 1992), can override hedonic goals and align behavior with normative principles. This argument is supported by the meta-analysis of Floyd *et al.* (2000), which applies Protection Motivation Theory. Their findings suggest that perceived threat severity and individuals' vulnerability increase adaptive behaviors, including compliance with norms. Finally, the normative goal refers to "acting appropriately", which aligns with the social-norms framework proposed by Bicchieri (2005). Acting appropriately involves beliefs about what people typically do and what is considered acceptable within a given social context.

Lindenberg argues that, at any given moment, one of these three goals becomes most salient for individuals. While individuals often prioritize hedonic (immediate pleasure) goals or pursue gain goals (based on cost–benefit considerations), the social environment, shaped by the presence and actions of others, can serve as a normative guide for behavior. Thus, social norms may influence individuals to act beyond the pursuit of pleasure or personal gain (Lindenberg and Steg, 2007).

The social environment is shaped through a process in which individuals develop behaviors, form expectations about others' behavior and receive signals about the group's predominant goal (Lindenberg, 2017; Bicchieri, 2005). A shared goal provides the basis for collective behavior, that is, adherence to social norms. In this sense, collective normative behavior can foster individual commitment to norms, overriding hedonic interests and the pursuit of personal gain.

In the context of compliance, “acting appropriately” or adhering to the normative goal is particularly relevant, as it relates to the established norms governing social life. However, since the normative goal typically ranks below hedonic and gain goals in individuals' goal hierarchy, it requires substantial support to remain salient (Six *et al.*, 2021). Compliance becomes unstable when gain or hedonic goals prevail (Lindenberg *et al.*, 2021). Following the principles of social contagion theory within the framework of Goal-Framing Theory (GFT), we argue that non-compliance with norms reflects the dominance of hedonic goals (e.g., avoiding the discomfort of wearing masks, attending crowded events, or visiting friends and family without restrictions). Risk aversion and fear of sanctions can be understood as expressions of gain goals, albeit framed negatively. Finally, normative goals involve doing what is appropriate for

oneself and others, highlighting the social dimension of behavior in which sociability plays a central role.

The following hypotheses have been derived from our conceptual framework:

H1. Citizens are more likely to comply with COVID-19 norms when they perceive that others are also complying.

H2. Citizens are more likely to comply with COVID-19 norms when they recognize the costs associated with non-compliance.

H3. Citizens are more likely to comply with COVID-19 norms when they fear contracting the virus.

A key issue regarding the centrality of normative goals concerns the legitimacy of rules. From this perspective, rules become social norms when individuals accept the authority that establishes them. However, governments may adopt varying regulatory approaches. Pierson (1993) proposed the concept of policy feedback, emphasizing the role of policies in shaping the behavior of both political elites and citizens. Subsequent studies have shown that policies influence citizens' behavior (Mettler and Soss, 2004) and can have a transformative effect by highlighting the benefits of civic conduct (Soss and Schram, 2007).

Nonetheless, governments often fail to elicit the desired behavior among citizens (Mettler, 2019). Building on the policy feedback framework, we argue that different policies generate distinct compliance preferences. Pierson (2000), when examining how supply-side dynamics shape demand-side outcomes, argues that institutional structures and existing policies produce mutually reinforcing feedback effects.

Negative feedback suggests the opposite effect. Wlezien (1995: 981) introduces the concept of “thermostatic” preferences and argues that:

When the actual “temperature” of policy differs from the preferred temperature, the public sends a signal to adjust the policy accordingly, and once sufficiently adjusted, the signal ceases.

In the context of COVID-19 restrictions, we incorporate the role of government into the policy feedback cycle and examine its impact on compliance (Moynihan and Soss, 2014). Lindenberg (2017) further asserts that institutional systems significantly shape how overarching goals (preferably prosocial and normative) are established for individuals and how they behave to maintain appropriate conduct.

Consistent with the positive feedback effect, we expect that governments with more permissive anti-COVID regimes—characterized by less stringent enforcement—will elicit a hedonistic response from individuals, with hedonic considerations taking precedence over normative ones. Conversely, in regimes with stricter policies and enforcement, normative goals are expected to dominate over hedonic and gain goals. This reasoning leads to our fourth hypothesis:

H4. The collective salience of each goal differs across regional contexts.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In this section, we first explain why Spain provides an appropriate context for testing our theoretical expectations regarding citizens’ preferences for anti-COVID-19 measures. This is followed by a subsection summarizing the experimental design and data.

### **Spain: a laboratory for analyzing citizens’ preferences for complying with anti-COVID-19 measures**

Spain was severely affected by the novel coronavirus during the first wave of the pandemic (March-May 2020). From a health perspective, the country experienced a high

number of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, resulting in one of the highest mortality rates in Europe. Economically, Spain was highly vulnerable due to the high share of the tourism and hospitality sector in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Consequently, the political debate over measures to balance public health and economic activity in these sectors quickly gained prominence in both the media and public opinion (Fraile and Méndez, 2021).

After the first period of the state of emergency (March 14 to June 21, 2020), declared by the national government (Royal Decree 463/2020) across the entire territory, the decentralized nature of Spain’s quasi-federal system returned to the forefront. Within the framework of minimum common-denominator agreements of the Intergovernmental Health Council, each regional government designed and implemented its own measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. Regional authorities had discretion over hours of operation, maximum allowed capacity in bars and restaurants, limits on the number of people allowed to gather in public places, and similar measures. In addition, regional and local authorities were responsible for enforcement.

In parallel, regional and local authorities implemented economic measures to mitigate the pandemic’s impact and encourage compliance with COVID-19 rules. In addition to grants and tax exemptions, the hospitality sector benefited from the tax-free use of public streets and sidewalks to set up tables and chairs, expanding business opportunities and offsetting occupancy restrictions in both indoor and outdoor areas.

Despite the limited discretion granted to the regions, their responses varied, producing additional effects on citizens’ civic behavior, social interactions, and rule compliance. We adopt a comparative interregional design to examine whether

**TABLE 1.** *Case selection*

Autonomous Community	Political orientation	Type of government	Degree of stringency
Asturias	Left-wing	Single-party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español [PSOE])	High
Galicia	Right-wing	Single-party (Partido Popular [PP])	High
Madrid	Right-wing	Coalition (PP/Ciudadanos)	Low
Valencia	Left-wing	Coalition (PSOE/Compromís/Unidas Podemos [UP])	Medium

Source: Author's own creation.

meaningful differences exist in citizens' preferences.

In addition to conducting a representative survey of the Spanish population, we focused on four autonomous communities (Asturias, Galicia, Madrid and Valencia) by oversampling respondents. These regions exhibited varying levels of stringency in the measures adopted and their enforcement (see Table 1). This variation was confirmed through interviews with local and regional authorities responsible for COVID-19 management during the second wave of the pandemic (Parrado *et al.*, 2025). The Madrid region adopted more permissive measures and frequently deviated from those agreed upon by the intergovernmental health body established to manage the pandemic. Galicia and Asturias, by contrast, implemented relatively strict measures, often justified by sociodemographic factors, such as Galicia's relatively older population, and by alignment with the national government's policy preferences (from the same political party in Asturias). Valencia also implemented strict measures, although interviewees noted that these were significantly relaxed to support the economy during the 2021-22 Christmas period, just prior to our survey's fieldwork (Parrado *et al.*, 2025). These four regions also differ in terms of government composition and ideological orientation. Following the pol-

icy feedback framework (Pierson, 2000), citizens in Madrid are expected to exhibit more hedonistic preferences. In regions with stricter policies, such as Asturias and Galicia, these motivations are expected to yield to normative goals.

The survey used for the conjoint exercise required approximately 10 minutes to complete and was administered to a nationally representative sample of Spanish residents aged 18 and older (N = 3291). To examine whether regional variations in the stringency of COVID-19 measures are associated with differences in citizens' preferences, the sample was also made representative for the four regions of interest: Asturias, Comunidad Valenciana, Galicia, and Madrid. The survey was administered through an opt-in access panel operated by Netquest, which compensated participants with vouchers redeemable for goods at Netquest's online store. Fieldwork was conducted between February 11 and March 10, 2022. In addition to conjoint analysis, the survey collected information on citizens' opinions, behaviors, and attitudes regarding anti-COVID-19 measures implemented in Spain and in their respective regions. The wording of the conjoint experiment is provided in the Appendix<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See Closa *et al.* (2022) for a report detailing all variables included in the survey. The dataset is also publicly available (see Closa *et al.*, 2025).

## Adapting Goal Framework Theory for the conjoint experiment

The conjoint experiment, embedded in a web-based platform, simulated choices related to the hospitality industry (bars, pubs, and restaurants), which are common gathering places for Spaniards to meet friends and family. Notably, Spain has ranked first in Europe in the number of such establishments (among 26 EU countries) since 2018<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, all respondents could realistically encounter this type of situation, making it a relevant contextual factor.

We adapted the tenets of the GFT to our conjoint experiment, which focused on decisions about entering a bar or restaurant following the fourth wave of COVID-19 (Omicron variant). During this period, entry to bars in most Spanish regions was permitted, albeit with restrictions. Key rules included wearing a mask at all times in bars except when drinking or eating, maintaining a social distance of 1.5 meters between chairs (rather than tables), and limiting maximum capacity based on local health risk levels. Some of these restrictions were adapted for a hypothetical scenario in the conjoint experiment.

Conjoint experiments have gained popularity among social scientists because they allow the analysis of multi-dimensional preferences and the causal effects of different attributes on hypothetical choices (Bansak *et al.*, 2021; Ganter, 2023; Hainmueller *et al.*, 2014). This method is particularly suitable for assessing GFT as it can estimate the relative importance of specific values and attributes that citizens prioritize. As noted earlier, the normative goal in GFT competes

with hedonic and gain goals for preeminence at the group level. This dominance of one goal over the others varies across contexts, reinforcing individual behavior and the salience of that goal.

The conjoint experiment presented respondents with a scenario in which they could choose to enter a bar, with two alternatives described by four attributes. Each attribute could take one of two values, randomly assigned in each profile. Random assignment of attribute values allows for the causal identification of how each attribute and its value influence respondents' decision to consume at the bar or restaurant. Table 2 summarizes the two possible values of each of the four attributes<sup>4</sup>. The attributes and their values were chosen so that all possible combinations are logically possible and equally realistic<sup>5</sup>. Following Hainmueller *et al.* (2014), this approach avoids excluding any combination that could occur in diverse hypothetical situations.

Each respondent was asked to choose their preferred alternative across four rounds, yielding a total of 26 328 observations. By iteratively pairing the situations and analyzing the rankings selected by each respondent, we aimed to iden-

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://www.ibisworld.com/spain/industry-statistics/pubs-bars-nightclubs/3445/>, access December 12, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> The precise wording of the question in the original language (Spanish) can be found in the Appendix. The English version of the question as presented in the online survey is as follows: "Imagine we are at the peak of a wave with many cases of COVID-19, with a high percentage of the population vaccinated with two doses (or equivalent) and there are two restrictions on access to bars and restaurants: 1) indoor drinking is restricted and 2) masks are required when not eating or drinking. In this context, you will see four pairs of different situations. For each pair, please indicate which of the two situations you prefer. You may choose neither or both, but please choose the situation you prefer".

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that there were significant differences in both the type and number of measures adopted by regional governments in Spain. These differences received extensive coverage in both traditional and social media, making it reasonable to assume that participants were quite familiar with the distinct norms and regulations.

**TABLE 2.** *Attributes and their values*

Attribute	Values
Mask-wearing	Everyone wears a mask when not drinking. Almost no one wears a mask.
Law enforcement	Police issue fines to those who do not comply. Police do not show up to issue fines.
Area of the bar/restaurant where consumption takes place	Outdoors. Indoors.
Booster vaccination coverage	35 % of the population. 70 % of the population.

Source: Closa *et al.* (2025), author's own creation.

tify the most salient overarching goals and their alignment with the relevant norm. Each attribute in the conjoint experiment was linked to a specific overarching goal of GFT.

For the first attribute (mask-wearing; see Table 2), there are two alternatives: everyone complies and wears the mask when required (reflecting the normative goal) versus almost no one wears the mask (representing the hedonic escape). The second attribute (enforcement through sanctions) corresponds to the gain goal and the cost-benefit calculation of the probability of receiving a fine. This attribute is presented in two scenarios: in one, the police sanction non-compliers, which may discourage prioritization of the gain goal; in the other, the police do not enforce fines, allowing the hedonic goal to predominate.

The third and fourth scenarios relate to risk perception. For the third attribute, respondents could choose to consume either indoors or outdoors in winter (February 2022). Given widespread public messaging about the risk of contracting COVID-19 indoors, this attribute captures the trade-off between the hedonic motivation to drink in the comfort of a bar and the preference for drinking outdoors. The

fourth attribute provides information on vaccination status, specifically the coverage of a booster dose (typically the third dose). In one scenario, 35 % of the population had received the booster vaccination, while in the other, 70 % had. Risk perception in both cases relates to the gain goal (i.e., a cost-benefit evaluation) but it operates through a distinct mechanism. Here, compliance is not the central issue. Rather, what matters is the extent to which an individual's overriding goal is shaped by the perception of a risky situation, independent of the behavior of others. Risk perception refers to a subjective assessment of the health threat posed to individuals (Neuburger and Egger, 2021), which may lead them to forgo the gain goal to avoid potential losses.

We included control variables that prior research has shown to influence compliance with anti-COVID-19 measures, including gender (Galasso *et al.*, 2020; Mazza and Scipioni, 2022), age (Oude Groeniger *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021), education (Nivette *et al.*, 2021), political orientation (Goldstein and Wiedemann, 2021; Harper *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021), and policy feedback from different governments (Moynihan and Soss, 2014; Pierson, 1993).

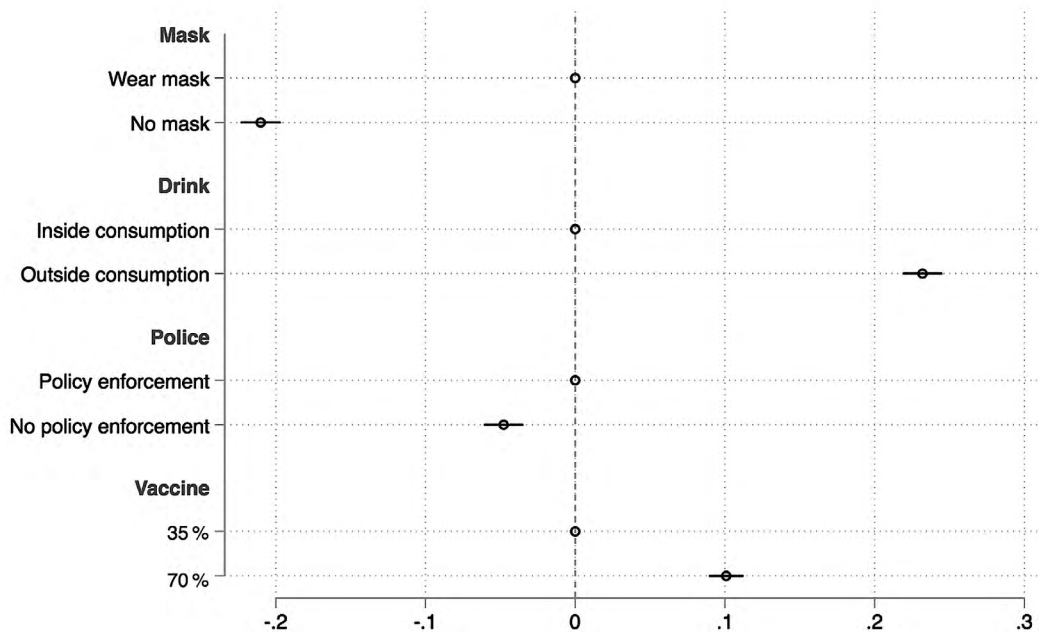
## RESULTS

Figure 1 summarizes the main results of participants' preferences regarding whether to enter a bar or restaurant to consume. The figure presents estimates from a linear probability model with standard errors clustered at the individual level, accounting for the fact that each respondent completed four pairs of comparisons. Table A1 in the Appendix provides the estimated coefficients, which include the four conjoint attributes as independent variables, along with several control variables measured at the individual level: gender (coded 1 for women and 0 for men), age (in years), education (an ordinal variable ranging from 0 for elementary school or less; 1 for secondary school; 2 for high school; 3 for university; to 4 for master's/PhD), and ideology (a scale ranging from 0 for extreme left to 10 for ex-

treme right). In addition, the model incorporates fixed effects for region of residence (Asturias, Valencia, Galicia and Madrid versus the rest of Spain). These controls were included to assess whether systematic differences exist in attribute preferences across these characteristics. We also replicated the analysis without control variables, and the results remained robust, suggesting that the randomization process was effective.

Figure 1 summarizes the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) of the four attributes (estimates based on the coefficients in Table A2) and indicates that citizens' preferences are influenced by social and risk-related considerations. Among the four attributes examined, mask-wearing when not drinking or eating, and consuming outdoors emerge as the most relevant dimensions in explaining the preference to

**FIGURE 1.** Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) on respondents' decisions to enter a bar or restaurant for consumption



Source: Closa et al. (2025), author's own creation based on the results of Table A1.

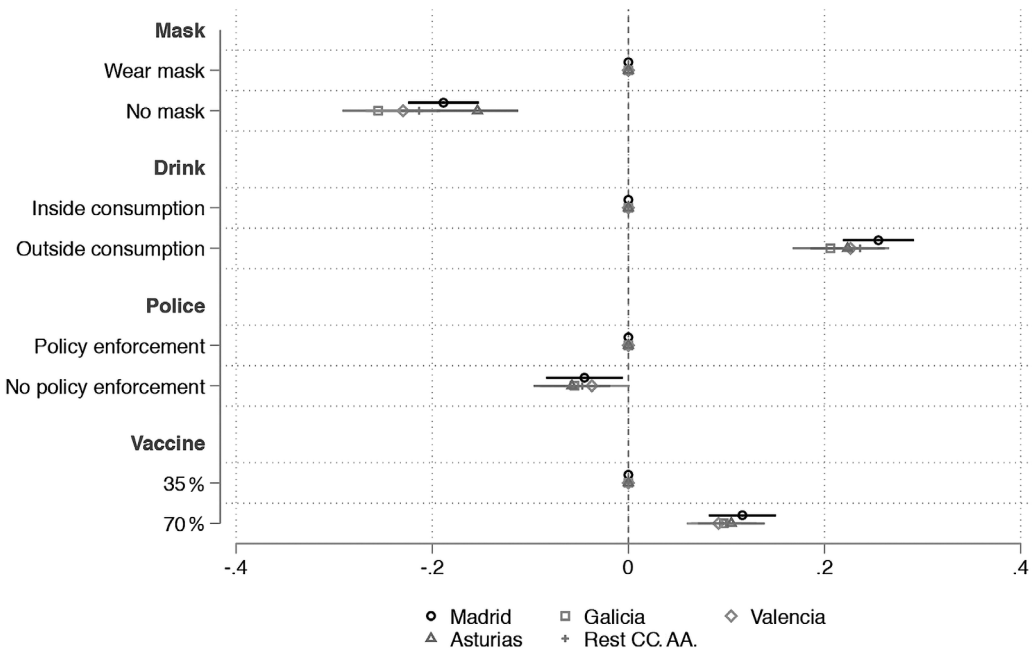
enter a venue. Specifically, the probability of deciding to enter a bar or restaurant increases by 23 percentage points when consumption takes place outdoors (compared to an indoor setting). Conversely, the likelihood decreases by 21 percentage points when individuals are not wearing masks when not drinking (compared with venues where masks are always worn).

The likelihood of entering the bar or restaurant also increases by 10 percentage points when respondents perceive that other patrons are largely protected (70 % of the population vaccinated) compared with a scenario in which only a minority (30 %) is vaccinated. Finally, the perceived risk of being sanctioned for noncompliance appears largely irrelevant, as the probability of consumption only decreases by approximately five percentage points when no enforcement is present.

These findings suggest that citizens override their hedonic goals when they perceive that others are not adhering to the norm or when the situation poses a health risk. They prioritize the gain goal (minimizing risk) and the normative motivation to act appropriately in accordance with social norms.

We hypothesized that the relevance of each attribute might vary by region of residence, reflecting a policy feedback effect. As mentioned above, citizens may adjust their preferences based on the types of policies implemented in their region. For example, we would expect citizens in Madrid to prioritize hedonic motives over social or risk-related considerations. To test this, we replicates the estimation presented in Figure 1, adding a set of interaction terms between each of the four attributes and region of residence (relative to the rest of Spain). Figure 2 presents the main results.

**FIGURE 2.** Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) on respondents' decisions to enter a bar or restaurant for consumption, by region in Spain



Source: Closa et al. (2025), author's own creation based on the results of Table A1.

Contrary to our expectations, however, Figure 2 indicates that citizens' preferences are influenced similarly by social and risk-related considerations across all regions examined, with the exception of mask-wearing when not consuming. The coefficient for this attribute is higher in Galicia (25 percentage points) and lower in Asturias (18 percentage points), with no overlap in the confidence intervals.

We also examined potential sources of heterogeneity in the effects of the four main attributes at the individual level, corresponding to our control variables (gender, education, age, and ideology). We found no meaningful differences between men and women, young and old, across education levels, or among individuals with different ideologies.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Building on social contagion theory, which emphasizes the importance of social norms in shaping behavior, we adapt Goal-Framing Theory (GFT) to a context (entering a bar) where sociability is in tension with COVID-19 regulations. According to GFT, the normative goal represents the fundamental motivation to preserve the common good, driven by a sense of obligation to act appropriately when others comply and when an established social norm exists (Bicchieri, 2005).

To explore how individuals prioritize their goals in the context of COVID-19 norms, we designed a conjoint experiment in which multiple attributes were combined to create two alternatives. One alternative reflects the hedonic/gain pathway and the other reflects the normative/prosocial one. Participants were presented with two hypothetical scenarios involving the possibility of entering a bar

during the peak of the Omicron wave. Each scenario varied across key dimensions including mask use, higher and lower-risk contagion conditions (sitting indoors or outdoors), booster vaccination rates, and the potential for sanctions as a mechanism to enforce norm compliance.

Among the motivations examined, fear of contracting the virus appears to carry the greatest weight in shaping the decision to enter (or avoid) a bar when the environment is perceived as unsafe, consistent with prior research. For instance, a large-scale study by Liberoth *et al.* (2021), surveying over 173 000 individuals across 48 countries, found that those who feared contracting a disease were more likely to adopt protective measures. Other studies have also highlighted the importance of perceived disease risk as a key determinant of behavioral change (Dryhurst *et al.*, 2020; Harper *et al.*, 2021; Webster *et al.*, 2020).

Risk perception is shaped by factors such as knowledge, visibility, trust, and voluntariness (Slovic, 1992). Limited knowledge about an issue or phenomenon tends to increase perceived risk. For example, unfamiliar diseases or pandemics with unpredictable effects are especially frightening because individual responses to the threat are uncertain. Low visibility of a hazard also heightens perceived risk. Therefore, it is not surprising that COVID-19 risk has been a key factor in motivating individuals to modify their behavior (e.g., entering a venue knowing that most attendees are vaccinated or preferring outdoor to indoor settings). According to social contagion theory (Scherer and Cho, 2003), risk perception can prompt similar behaviors among people in the same context. Consequently, individuals' cost-benefit evaluations may influence others to comply with norms.

Risk perception, however, represents a gain-related motivation that is not associated with sanctions. Consistent with our results, the presence of sanctions did not significantly influence compliance. This suggests that Coleman's (1994) argument, that social norms emerge when the costs of micro-level, goal-oriented individual actions (due to sanctions) outweigh the benefits, does not fully apply to the Spanish context studied here.

The concept of prosociality (Bicchieri *et al.*, 2020) is closely linked to compliance, and widespread mask use ranked highly in individual preferences, consistent with previous studies (Oosterhoff and Palmer, 2020). Lindenberg *et al.* (2021) emphasize that mask use requires sustained support over time. Given that the fieldwork for this study was conducted during the Omicron variant wave, nearly two years into the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is reasonable to assume that mask use had already become largely normalized, despite the fatigue associated with prolonged compliance.

According to GFT, overarching goals shape how individuals process and respond to information (Lindenberg and Steg, 2007). Hedonic, gain, and normative goals may be activated simultaneously, but they are not always compatible. COVID-19 norms, such as social distancing and mask use, may conflict with the hedonic pleasure of socializing with friends and family in a bar. However, a disruptive factor, such as the pandemic outbreak, that shifts the gain-goal calculus and creates significant losses may tip the balance, aligning normative and gain goals while relegating hedonic motivations to the background. In this context, the government did not need to exert substantial effort to reconcile gain and normative goals, as GFT proponents might suggest, because the virus's impact was widely visible. Nevertheless, GFT remains useful in ranking and understanding different motivations when designing policies.

Finally, and contrary to our expectations, the stricter policies implemented in some regions (Galicia and Asturias) did not significantly influence respondents' decisions to select a more restrictive scenario. Prior studies have shown that the severity of measures can increase trust in government and encourage compliance with COVID-19 regulations (Chong *et al.*, 2020). In our study, the hypothetical nature of the scenario (an experiment embedded within a survey) likely diminished the relevance of participants' regional contexts.

We conclude by acknowledging several limitations of this study. First, our scenario for testing GFT was conducted at a specific point in time and was limited to a single social situation. While this context is relevant, as it highlights the tension between hedonic motivation and compliance with norms, it introduces an inherent self-selection bias: many individuals avoided bars during the pandemic because they perceived them as unsafe. Unfortunately, we did not ask respondents about their likelihood of entering a bar in either scenario (the preferred option or the non-chosen one). Moreover, we cannot determine whether the results would have differed in a subsequent wave of the pandemic. Ideally, a panel study spanning the entire pandemic would have allowed us to control for temporal variations in severity and better understand how motivations evolved over time. Finally, our study does not address involuntary situations, such as commuting to work using public transportation.

Second, although we attempted to identify different attributes for each scenario, this was not always possible. For example, we could not determine whether mask-wearing, or the absence of it reflected social pressure or a risk-related consideration. When conjoint experiments move beyond the domain such as consumer goods, common in marketing research, or the choice of a presidential candidate, typi-

cal in political science studies, constructing clearly contrasting scenarios becomes more challenging.

Finally, the external validity of our study may be limited to the Spanish context. While we do not claim that our findings generalize to other settings, we believe that this conjoint experimental design could be applied to other pandemic situations and to environments where bar socializing is common.

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**REVIEW:** May 19, 2025

**ACCEPTANCE:** October 16, 2025

## APPENDIX

**TABLE A1.** *Main results Conjoint*

	Preferred situation
Mask wearing	0.210 *** (0.007)
Outside consumption	0.238 *** (0.007)
Penalty Fee	0.050 *** (0.007)
70 % Vaccination rate	0.102 *** (0.006)
Women	0.006 ** (0.002)
Age (in years)	0.003 (0.002)
Education	-0.001 (0.001)
Ideology	-0.001 * (0.000)
<b>Regions</b>	
Asturias	0.005 (0.004)
Valencia	0.000 (0.003)
Galicia	0.004 (0.003)
Madrid	-0.004 (0.003)
Intercept	0.456 *** (0.003)
Number of observations	23408

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: Closa *et al.* (2025). LPM estimations.

### Wording of the conjoint design (original language: Spanish)

Imagínate que nos encontramos en una situación en el pico de una ola con muchos casos de COVID, en la que un alto porcentaje de la población está vacunada con las dos dosis o equivalente y existen algunas restricciones de acceso a bares y restaurantes: la consumición en interiores está limitada y se exige la mascarilla cuando no se esté consumiendo.

En este contexto, vamos a mostrarte 4 pares de situaciones. Para cada par, indica, por favor, en cuál de las dos situaciones accederías al local. Puede que no lo hagas en ningún caso o que lo hagas en ambos casos, pero, por favor, elige una de las dos situaciones.

Posteriormente te preguntaremos con qué probabilidad entrarías en el local en esa situación.

#### Categorías y atributos para combinar en las siguientes preguntas:

	Categorías	Atributos
1	Mascarillas	Todos se la ponen cuando no consumen Casi nadie tiene puesta la mascarilla
2	La consumición debe hacerse	Dentro del local En la terraza
3	La policía	Pone multas a quienes incumplen No aparece para poner multas
4	La tercera dosis de la vacuna	En el 35 % de la población En el 70 % de la población

¿Qué situación prefieres para entrar al local a consumir? 1/4 [Ejemplo, así sucesivamente hasta 4 pares por participante]

#		Situación 1	Situación 2
1	Mascarillas	Todos los clientes se la ponen cuando no consumen	Casi nadie tiene puesta la mascarilla
2	La consumición debe hacerse	Dentro del local	En la terraza
3	La policía	Pone multas a quienes incumplen	No aparece para poner multas
4	La tercera dosis de la vacuna	En el 35 % de la población	En el 70 % de la población

¿Tu preferencia?

