The Symbolic Instrumentalisation of the Face Mask in (De)legitimising Discourse: A Critical Study of User-Generated Online Content at the Onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic in the US

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Abstract
No longer solely tools in the prevention and mitigation of the spread of diseases, since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic face masks have become politically and ideologically charged symbols in the American context that have been deployed to articulate discourses of exclusion and to position people and groups as 'the other'. The present paper adopts a critical discourse analytical perspective to examine the discursive strategies employed in popular user-generated memes and tweets that advance pro- and anti-mask stances and were shared in the first months of the pandemic in the United States. Findings reveal a tendency for pro-mask content to enact positive self- and negative other-presentation via nomination, predicational, and (de)legitimisation strategies based mainly on moral evaluation, while anti-mask memes seek legitimisation via emotive effects, the invocation of the *topos of threat*, and casting doubt on the intentions of institutions.

Key-words: critical discourse analysis, (de)legitimisation strategies, internet memes, predicational strategies, nomination strategies, social media communication.

1. Introduction

On 22 May 2020, Republican Governor Doug Burgum made an emotional plea to North Dakota residents to forgo the "senseless" creation of "a divide – either it's ideological or political or something – around mask versus no mask". Once a rather innocuous object, since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic the mask has acquired symbolic status and has been deployed as a tool in the American context to articulate discourses of exclusion and to position people and groups as 'the other'. The present paper investigates this phenomenon and takes a discourse-historical approach to critical

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discourse analysis (CDA) (Reisigl and Wodak 2009) to examine the discursive strategies employed in viral user-generated memes and tweets that enact pro- and anti-mask stances. Specifically, it analyses the (co)construction of meaning, the (de)legitimisation strategies (van Leeuwen 2007), and the nomination and predicational strategies (Wodak 2011) employed in selected internet memes and tweets expressing both sides of the mask divide and shared in the first months of the pandemic (April to July 2020) in the United States.

2. The mask as a symbol

Since the start of the pandemic, inconsistency has marred the message to the American public on face-coverings. As detailed in Zimmerman (2020), healthcare professionals and government officials at the highest levels made public remarks apropos the inefficiency of masks[1]. This message was rooted primarily in concerns that a civilian rush for masks would compromise their availability for medical providers but the takeaway was simple: the populace should neither buy nor wear face-coverings.

Subsequent to the official Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommendation in early April 2020 to wear face-coverings in public places, the tide had turned – at least in part. Gallup polling revealed a one-week 24% increase in outdoor mask-wearing by Americans following the recommendation (Brenan 2020). Yet the immediate effect on health behaviour was hampered by US officials, not least the President. During a press briefing on 3 April 2020, Donald Trump declared:

> The CDC is advising the use of non-medical cloth face covering as an additional voluntary public health measure. So it's voluntary; you don't have to do it. They suggested for a period of time. But this is voluntary. I don't think I'm going to be doing it. (The White House 2020)

Emphasis on the non-obligatory nature of these measures –

[1] A noteworthy example is the 29 February 2020 tweet by the US Surgeon General Jerome Adams: "Seriously people – STOP BUYING MASKS! They are NOT effective in preventing general public from catching #Coronavirus".

conveyed both with the use of the verbs 'advising' and 'suggested', and the reiteration of the term 'voluntary' and its definition ('you don't have to do it') – and, more poignantly, the admission that he was not planning to follow CDC advice did little to counteract any ambivalence Americans felt towards mask-wearing. Contrarily, it embodied and emboldened a partisan divide that spread to the states: while some blue states readily implemented mask mandates, red states were reluctant to enact them and even banned city governments from doing so.

Flaskerud (2020: 847) argues that "uniquely in the USA, masks have become a touch stone for political identity". National polls sustain this stance (Brenan 2020): in June 2020, Democrats were 23% more likely to report mask-wearing and, although the partisan divide decreased in later polling, the trend persisted (Kramer 2020). Evidence of this divide also recurred in American public discourse. In conservative circles, anti-mask messages were deployed to articulate and bolster opposition to forced lockdowns and health-focused mandates. For instance, radio pundit Rush Limbaugh said that masks were a symbol deployed by the left and the media to promote fear and hysteria, and his words were reiterated in late April by Laura Ingraham on her primetime *Fox News* show. Then, despite rising Covid-19 cases in Palm Beach Florida, an emergency order in June 2020 to require face masks roused citizens to charge that it was rooted in a political conspiracy "to hold us hostage as American citizens" and to "remov[e] our freedoms". For Democrats, in contrast, masks became a symbol of "trust in science and medicine" (Flaskerud 2020: 846). Left-leaning media charged that a lack of government commitment to mandating masks hurt the US coronavirus response (e.g. Smith 2020) and, in mid-July, the Democratic Governor of Colorado called those who refuse to wear masks "selfish bastards".

Seen through the lens of this politicisation, masks are not solely tools in the prevention and mitigation of the spread of Covid-19, but they have become politically and ideologically charged symbols (Kahn 2020). Specifically, the face mask obtained the status of condensation symbol (Graber 1976), which, only distantly connected to its referent, is a symbol that "take[s] on meanings that are shaped by politics, communities, and myths" and is rooted in "emotion, affect, passion, or sentimentality rather than facts or

reason" (Sinclair-Chapman 2018: 316, 318). These characterising features of condensation symbols, Sinclair-Chapman (2018) holds, make it difficult for individuals to challenge or reframe their views on them because these symbols signal belonging, allegiance, and/or legitimacy to a group. This paper explores the mechanisms by which face-coverings have been symbolically instrumentalised by investigating user-generated online content in which the mask has been instanced and by uncovering the discursive strategies employed by both proponents and opponents of this symbol.

3. Social media texts

Bouvier and Machin (2018) discuss the challenges that social media (SM) pose for CDA, which has traditionally centred on texts produced by powerful entities to unveil the discourses used to secure power. SM have developed a new communication protocol that blurs the line between text producers and consumers, destabilises the traditional unidirectional media interface, and creates new spaces for engagement and participation (KhosraviNik 2017). Although it is exigent to note that industry-level SM practices have hampered democratised discourse formation and favoured the creation of discursive echo chambers, it is also undeniable that SM have transformed the relationship between media/governing bodies and the public, have heightened multimodality and, ultimately, have reshaped the processes of dissemination of dominant ideologies and discourses across societies.

Several recent studies have provided enlightening insights into SM communication. Bouvier (2017) conducted multimodal CDA of a trending Twitter feed that documented a woman's journey from Ireland to have an abortion, and its uptake by news outlets. The analysis revealed that the tweets employed features of compelling SM language – including identification of an adversary, fostering solidarity, and visuals to enhance authenticity – which made the story newsworthy. In light of this user's ability to have her ideologies taken up by mainstream media, Bouvier (2017) importantly argues that SM are propelling a shift away from elite sources and urges for a broadening of the definition of 'elites' to include not only politicians, officials, and institutions but also effective and creative users of SM.

Another research strand focused on the analysis of internet memes – or "socially constructed public discourses in which different memetic variants represent diverse voices and perspectives" (Shifman 2014: 8). Wiggins (2019: xv) maintains that internet memes are "discursive units of digital culture" that indicate "an ideological practice" perpetrated in their "construction, comprehension, and furtherance". In his comprehensive work dedicated to image-based memes, Wiggins (2019) adapts and expands Shifman's (2014) memetic typology of content, form, and stance to highlight the critical roles held by semiotics, intertextuality, and the larger group/community (for whom a meme reflects an ideological practice) in the construction of meaning. The application of these understandings to the analysis of political memes leads Wiggins (2019: 81, emphasis added) to conclude that they were deployed "because of their *discursive power* to incite political participation […] or to express disagreement with the dominant order", thereby substantiating the importance of image-based memes in modern discourse.

Ross and Rivers (2017) adopt multimodal discourse analysis to examine how memes were employed as a device for the delegitimisation of candidates in the 2016 US presidential election via strategies of authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis (van Leeuwen 2007). With their study, the authors take two pivotal positions: internet memes lay bare the interconnections between everyday texts and public discourses, and strategies of (de)legitimisation apply not only to institutions but also to individuals, particularly those in positions of power.

The present paper takes Ross and Rivers' (2017) argument a step further and posits that strategies of (de)legitimisation can apply also to the adherents of ideologies who produce content to propagate their stance. It applies a critical lens to the (multimodal) analysis of online content related to the pro-/anti-mask debate that unfolded after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic to look at the kinds of discourses and ideologies that are carried across these communities of opinion. Informed by the aforementioned literature and in line with Bouvier's (2017) and Machin and van Leeuwen's (2016) recommendation for researchers to shift attention away from more elite text types and toward more popular forms of communication, this study homes in on selected memes and tweets.

4. Procedure

4.1. Internet memes

To identify the pro- and anti-mask internet memes analysed in this study, the most popular memes (in terms of likes, scores, reactions, and post recurrence) in the four-month period from April to July 2020 were selected via a search on Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit of the terms 'mask', 'masks', and 'anti-maskers', and trending hashtags including 'MaskUp', 'MasksOff' and 'KarensGoneWild'[2]. Table 1 describes the selected memes in more detail.

TABLE 1
Description of selected memes

Name	*Place*	*First posted*	*Reactions*[3]	*More information*
IQ test	Twitter	24/06/2020	122.6k likes, 30.9k retweets	Text tweeted by author and activist John Lundin
Urine test	Reddit	20/04/2020	129k Reddit score	Shared on Twitter by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (2.4k retweets, 4.4k likes)
Braveheart vs. Veruca Salt	Reddit	17/07/2020	56.6k Reddit score	Other iterations feature other stills
Don't tread on me	Facebook	22/04/2020	2.4k reactions, 547 shares	Created by American conservative non-profit organisation PragerU
Masks to enslave	Reddit	17/04/2020	2.6k Reddit score	Voted 'cringe' by Reddit community
Guy tapping head	Twitter	09/07/2020	1.4k likes, 1.4k retweets	Text-only versions are also recurrent

[2] The meme Karen, emblemised by the hashtag #KarensGoneWild, has been used to condemn white privilege and self-centeredness, and was connected to viral accounts of white middle-aged women refusing to wear face-coverings.
[3] All reaction counts are updated as of 15 September 2020.

4.2. Tweets

The data archiving tool Twarc was used to collect all tweets that contained the word 'masks'. Because of the high volume of English-language tweets generated, the search was restricted to those posted on a single day, or 12 July 2020. The rationale for this selection is twofold: mid-July witnessed the first nation-wide peak in the number of US Covid-19 cases and Donald Trump had worn a mask in public for the first time on the preceding day, thereby fuelling discussions on face-coverings.

After retweets and duplicate tweets were deleted, the resulting corpus, which consisted of 30,212 tweets (1,042,187 tokens), was arranged by number of likes. This was defined as the criterion for selection for several reasons including that users generally like a tweet because they like its content (Meier *et al.* 2014) and it is most resonant with and representative of their views, and most-liked tweets are more visible and impactful. The most-liked tweets were coded for whether they expressed pro- or anti-mask views to identify the top ten tweets on both sides of the debate. Tweets that were deemed irrelevant (e.g. those that explicitly catered to contexts outside of the US), were no longer available as of 15 September 2020, and for which authors sought opt-out consent (Williams *et al.* 2017) were deleted. The resulting sample consisted of seven pro- and eight anti-mask tweets.

4.3. Analytical framework

This study applied a discourse-historical approach to CDA (Reisigl and Wodak 2009) and explored the function of two discursive positive self- and negative other-presentation macro-strategies, or nomination and predication, in the discursive construction of identities, ideologies, and of in- and out-groups (Wodak 2011). It further adopted van Leeuwen's (2007) framework for analysing discourses of (de)legitimation, which comprises four main categories, or authorisation (reference to authority figures, tradition, or conformity), moral evaluation (reference to moral values), rationalisation (reference to goals, truth, or appropriateness) and mythopoesis (such as moral or cautionary tales), and the useful considerations on these categories offered by Reyes (2011). Lastly,

for the analysis of memes, special heed was given to the tripartite typology of memetic dimensions, or content, form, and stance, developed by Schifman (2014), and refined by Wiggins (2019).

5. Results and discussion

5.1. An IQ test or a muzzle? Examining pro-/anti-mask memes

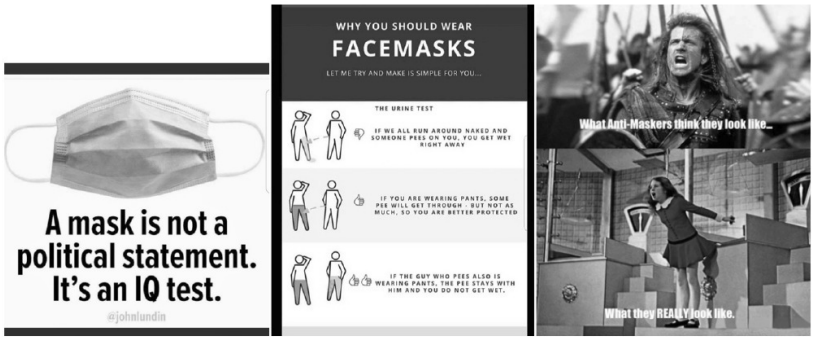
The first three internet memes under study (Figure 1) were created with the aim of propagating the use of masks principally by establishing negative other-presentation. The 'IQ test' meme is an image-macro depicting the text of a widely-shared, attributed tweet below a photo of a face-covering. Together, the text and the accompanying stock image do not manifest the directionality of the meme, and the characteristics attributed to 'self' and 'other' are not explicitly named. It therefore provides an example of the neutral nature of memes, as defined in Wiggins (2019: 64): "the meaning *ascribed* to memes is achieved *actively* by individuals and groups". In this case, meaning can be interpreted most unambiguously via tweet attribution, i.e. knowledge of Twitter user @johnlundin's pro-mask and left-leaning political views. Thus, the meme is suggestive of the belief that mask-abstainers (the 'other') have a low IQ and, conversely, mask-wearers (the 'self') have a high IQ. Yet, the textual content of the meme, albeit implicitly, also sheds light on the group that is marginalised as cognitively inferior. First, mask-abstaining may be deemed unintelligent since it is a practice at odds with expert/scientific recommendations. Then, the element "an IQ text" evokes prejudicial discourse about the American political and geographical landscape that has cast inhabitants of the conservative south and rural areas as uneducated and unintelligent 'hillbillies' or 'rednecks'.

The 'Urine test' meme appears as an instruction manual with the aim to inform. The meme's heading "Why you should wear facemasks" and its subheading "Let me try and make is [*sic*] simple for you" both designate those who have not yet understood why masks should be worn as the audience for whom this how-to-like meme was created and suggest that this audience requires a simplified (i.e. non-scientific, dumbed-down) explanation to grasp the message. This notion is reinforced by the use of stick-figures,

simplistic vocabulary, redundant structures (conditional), and the evaluative thumbs up/down icons. Thus, akin to the 'IQ test' meme, it implies that mask-abstainers (the 'other') lack intellectual acuity.

The 'Urine test' meme also creates an analogy that has several functions. First, the absurd and slapstick nature of the analogy frames the meme as humorous. Then, it has a legitimatory function (van Leeuwen 2007) that answers the question "why should I wear facemasks?" with "because it is like wearing pants" which, of course, is associated with positive, norm-conforming values. The postulation that breathing/coughing directly on someone is comparable to urinating on someone highlights the gravity and social inappropriateness of masklessness, which, in turn, serves to position mask-abstainers as acting in gross violation of social norms.

FIGURE 1
Memes advocating for mask use

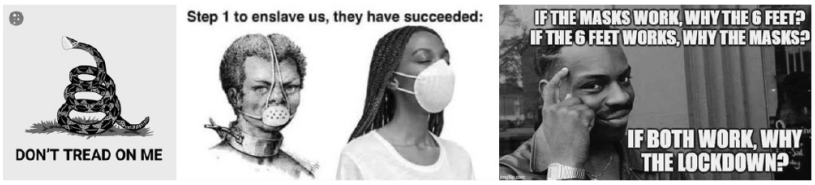


The text in the 'Braveheart vs. Veruca Salt' meme, which is the only meme to explicitly define 'the other' as anti-maskers, accomplishes negative other-presentation in multiple ways. In the meme, the top image shows actor Mel Gibson as the patriotic hero of the 1995 epic film *Braveheart* fearlessly charging onto the battlefield. This film still is juxtaposed with an image of Veruca Salt, one of the antagonists in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971), depicted as she sings the song "I want it now!". On the one hand, by suggesting that in reality they are not the righteous champions they "think they

look like", this meme labels anti-maskers as delusional. On the other hand, the use of Veruca Salt to personify anti-maskers in the "what they REALLY look like" frame brands them as immature and childlike, and as selfish and entitled. The meme therefore not only employs the discursive strategies of predication and nomination to construct the 'out-group' and its negative presentation, but it also achieves the effect of delegitimising the ideological opposition on moral grounds (van Leeuwen 2007), i.e. they are not acting in favour of the common good.

The next three memes (Figure 2), which convey an anti-mask stance, do not directly centre on pro-maskers as the ideological opposition. The 'Don't tread on me' meme remixes an image of the Gadsden flag, recently championed by Libertarians to advocate for limited government and then by the right-wing populist Tea Party movement (Sinclair-Chapman 2018), and superimposes a face-covering on the coiled rattlesnake. When the modified flag is re-contextualised within anti-mask discourse, it bridges the ideologic stance(s) represented by the flag (e.g. anti-government, anti-elite, pro-states' rights) with mask-wearing, and channels the message that mask-wearing threatens individual rights.

FIGURE 2
Memes advocating for mask non-use



A similar message is related by the 'Masks to enslave' meme, albeit more scathingly. In this version of an image-macro meme, a caption appears above an 1839 drawing of Slave Anastácia (Johnson 2018), muzzled and chained, beside an image depicting a black woman wearing a mask. The two images are positioned side-by-side to equate muzzles with masks and to cast masks as the metonymical representation of slavery, a relationship rendered linguistically

explicit by the caption. The depiction of a slave and the word "enslave" indexically rouse a series of emotionally linked nuances that mould the meme's meaning and serve to legitimise its anti-mask and anti-government stance in terms of evoking the fear of losing fundamental freedoms and liberties (Reyes 2011). The use of "us" creates a sense of shared purpose and seeks consent in the belief that, with mask-mandates, threatening forces – or "they", used ambiguously to gloss over the heterogeneity of mask measures – are set to silence and tyrannise the populace.

The 'Guy tapping head' meme takes a different approach in its anti-mask stance by advocating mask scepticism. The parodic nature of the pictured man's gesture and the widespread use of the image as the backdrop of funny memes (whose humour is often grounded in fallacious argumentation) sets the expectation of a non-serious frame that is surprisingly not met by the textual element, ostensibly intended to be a serious logical argument. Although the text creates false dichotomies, or a fallacy that "consists of reducing many options to only two dichotomous ones" (Brisson *et al.* 2018), its intent is not only to fault Covid-19 containment measures but also to cast doubt on the honesty and trustworthiness of those who are implementing and supporting said measures.

The selected pro-mask memes (overtly or tacitly) instance ideological opponents, defined as mask abstainers or anti-maskers, and they use visual and textual elements to enact appreciative and deprecatory predication resulting in positive self- and, more recurrently, negative other-presentation with varying degrees of explicitness. Predicational and delegitimisation strategies based on moral evaluation are deployed to strip the ideological opposition of intellect, common sense, and civic responsibility. Consequently, these memes construct and reinforce sweeping generalisations not only of the cognitive and moral attributes of mask abstainers but also of the multitudinous reasons for which these individuals do not wear masks (Kahn 2020), thereby serving as a tool for exclusion and marginalisation. On the other hand, the anti-mask memes elicit emotive effects such as fears and anxieties (Reyes 2011) and invoke the *topos of threat* (Wodak 2011) in their implication that 'the other' is a loosely-defined menacing or deceitful force intent on quashing rights and freedoms. These findings resonate with Wiggins' (2019: 72) analysis of Russian memes that sought to occasion mistrust in

the American government "by casting doubt on the assumption that the authorities serve in the interest of the common good", and suggest that these mask-focused memes channel wider ideological stances including anti-government and anti-media sentiments.

5.2. Constructing threats, truth, and doubt in pro-/anti-mask tweets

This section discusses the most-liked user-generated tweets – containing the word 'masks' and posted on a single day in the first nationwide peak of the US Covid-19 crisis – that enact pro- and anti-mask stances. The analysis is arranged by discursive strategy, thereby homing in on how strategies are used differently – and similarly – by the two sides of the debate.

5.2.1. Appeal to numbers and 'truth'

The discursive strategy most often utilised in pro-mask tweets is the appeal to numbers and statistics, as displayed in tweets (a) and (b), which both regard the state of Florida and are similarly structured.

(a) If Florida were a country, it would rank fourth in the world for the most new cases in a day behind the United States, Brazil and India. Also, Disney reopened yesterday, RNC Convention is in Florida next month, schools open in a couple weeks, and Ron DeSatan won't mandate masks.
(b) Florida reported 15,000 NEW CASES of coronavirus today, a record for any state. Disney World is open The Governor refuses to require people to wear masks in pubic [sic]

Both tweets begin by citing numerical figures (rank and case numbers), which can be interpreted as a legitimisation strategy, seeing as exact numbers serve as indicators of knowledge and accuracy that evoke expertise, support authority, and ultimately strengthen opinions (Reyes 2011). These figures, intensified with comparatives, act as evidence of the threat posed by the spread of the virus in Florida (*topos of threat*, Wodak 2011). The tweets then occasion the opening of Disney World as an erroneous response to this threat before stating that Florida Governor DeSantis – delegitimised by user (a) on moral grounds with the moniker "DeSatan" – has not mandated mask-wearing, the appropriate action to take in this scenario, thereby condemning his inaction.

Most-favourited tweets by authors who advocated anti-mask stances also appealed to data or proof presented as scientific.

(c) Data suggests masks irrelevant. #ConstitutionOverCoronavirus
(d) An MD explains the truth & science behind the dangers of healthy people wearing masks..... Im sure MSM will pick up on this & help spread the word to the public instead of spewing their false narrative.🙄 #WakeUpAmerica #MasksOff

Tweet (c) was posted along with a misleading[4] video aimed at demonstrating the inefficacy of masks while the text in tweet (d) preceded a video in which a doctor who spread conspiracy theories about Covid-19 (Wingerter 2020) promoted debunked information about masks (e.g. "prolonged mask wearing actually increases the risk of disease to the wearer"). Regardless of the conspiratorial nature of these media and their sources, the textual content in tweets (c) and (d) makes an appeal to indistinct evidence ("data" and "truth & science") and expert authority (again, "data" and "an MD") to legitimise the irrelevance and dangers of masks, respectively. In tweet (c) these are occasioned to establish that the preservation of individual rights (including abstaining from masks) trumps health mandates, as suggested by the hashtag. In tweet (d), they are used to convey distrust in mainstream media (MSM), a sentiment that is further reinforced by the ironic frame expressed not only in the text but also by the face with rolling eyes emoji, a metaphor for condescension or exasperation (Danesi 2017), and by the plea for Americans to "wake up" embedded in the first hashtag.

The decry of fabrications purported by the ideological adversary was a strategy that emerged in tweets on both sides of the debate, often on the grounds that valid evidence to support their claims is lacking. In so doing, the charge is that they are in violation of the Gricean maxim of quality (see also Kirner-Ludwig 2020). For instance, the pro-mask author of the ironically framed tweet (e) appeals to numbers – "Oh wait that number is ZERO" – as evidence

[4] The video is misleading seeing as, in arguing that mask mandates did not lower Covid-cases, it features inconsistent graphic presentations of the data and disregards the role of other containment measures (e.g. lockdowns, social distancing, voluntary mask wearing) in accounting for decreased case numbers.

to situate as scientifically unfounded the 'masks pose a danger for healthy wearers' stance and to challenge its veracity.

(e) Let us pause for a moment of silence of all of the surgeons, nurses, ICU doctors, scrub techs, and anesthesiologists who have died from hypoxia by wearing a masks [sic] to protect their patients & themselves. Oh wait that number is ZERO (even in N95s). #WearAMask

Tweets that conveyed anti-mask stances also used this strategy, albeit differently:

(f) Amazing how just a few months can completely change the science behind masks 🤡
(g) Great! Now the left will criticize him for wearing a mask and hopefully we can stop wearing masks too! Go Mr. President!
(h) BREAKING: the CDC has determined face masks are no longer required since POTUS recently wore one. 🤣😂

User (f) comments on a March 2020 *Washington Post* article that maintained "you don't need to wear a mask" and employs sarcasm in declaring that the inconstant nature of "science" is "amazing". This justifies the user's attack on the ideological opposition, emblemised by the use of the clown face emoji. Then, user (g) celebrates Donald Trump's decision to wear a mask on the grounds that it will result in the political opposition's reassessment on masks based solely on the President's actions, and user (h) mockingly suggests that the CDC will reassess mask recommendations based on the same premise. In all, the three tweets express a distrust in media, science, the left, and government agencies that is rooted in the perceived ease with which they can 'flip-flop' on the mask issue, with the effect of indexing the information these institutions impart as unreliable and untrustworthy.

Other anti-mask tweets conveyed conspiratorial beliefs. In the two tweets that follow, users (i) and (j) index masks as a control mechanism of the masses, with user (i) adding the image of Slave Anastácia as evocative visual support:

(i) This is a type of masks that slaves were made to wear. But don't worry-masks are there to protect you...

(j) Wrap your head around this. If masks work so well why can't the people that think they work wear them and the people that don't think they work not wear them. Wouldn't the people wearing masks be protected from those not wearing masks? Unless they're BS and used to control...

The tweets also share ellipsis in turn-final position, with different functions. While in tweet (i) it cues irony, in tweet (j) the ellipsis represents a virtual trailing off, associated with an unfinished yet not necessarily tentative thought (since the textual element does not suggest uncertainty), that marks the sequence as "to be continued" and thus invites "dialogic expansion" (Vandergriff 2013: 5). The functional variation of the ellipsis encapsulates the tweets' ironic and dialogic frames, reinforced by the patronising "don't worry" in (i) and the invitation ("wrap your head around this") to consider the (fallacious) argumentation in (j), but they achieve the same positioning: both authors strategically position themselves as having privileged knowledge and insights on the issue of masks. Users (i) and (j) therefore claim the authority to invite readers to gain awareness – echoed in the hashtag #WakeUpAmerica used by user (d) – of the threat posed by masks to which they are already privy.

5.2.2. Evaluative attributions and moral evaluation

Other strategies that emerged in the tweets include indexing evaluative attributions – mainly in terms of negative other-presentation – and moral evaluation. In this domain, we find tweets representing both sides of the divide hinging on masculinity:

(k) From a dating perspective, these masks have made it much easier to identify the cucks.
(l) Multiple times this past week, I saw entire families wearing masks, except the dad. I truly don't get it. Does knowing how to change a tire make you immune to the virus?

User (k) uses the derogatory term "cucks" to describe mask-wearers. Although Alt-right circles have co-opted this term to describe tolerant conservatives who adhere to 'politically-correct culture', it nonetheless carries a gendered and sexualised meaning (McMillen 2018; Brigley Thompson 2020), which is evoked in tweet (k) with the phrase "from a dating perspective". Tweet (k) therefore seeks

to position mask-wearing as emasculating, and those who engage in mask-wearing as ineligible or undesirable suitors. The text in tweet (l) seems to act in direct response to tweet (k). After reporting on the observation – also supported by poll data (e.g. Brenan 2020) – that men are less likely to wear masks than women, the user applies a non-serious frame by citing a male trope ("knowing how to change a tire") to denaturalise the link between masculinity and mask-wearing.

Other top tweets employed moral evaluation, "linked to specific discourses of moral value" (van Leeuwen 2007: 97):

(m) Masks are pro-life.
(n) Here's a secret: we liberals want Trump supporters to wear masks because then fewer people get sick and die.
(o) Peaceful creatures just wanna frolic through the fields and take in the scenery but racists, fascists and morons who won't wear masks just won't let us live.

In tweet (m), the author re-appropriates the anti-abortion descriptor thereby at once equating mask-wearing with saving lives and exposing the paradox of individuals who are pro-life (in the traditional sense) but disregard human life with their anti-mask stance. Tweet (n) applies a similar approach and defines mask-wearers as fulfilling a civic duty and as acting on behalf of the community. While tweets (m) and (n) contain an implicit attack on mask-abstainers, user (m) cites fallacious generalisations and sets up an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy in his depiction of mask-wearers as "peaceful creatures" versus "racists, fascists and morons". Across the three tweets, the attributes benevolent, altruistic, and peaceful are assigned to 'us' and the antagonist 'other' is, at best, inversely defined.

In sum, unlike in the analysis of memes, several similarities transpired in the strategies utilised by tweets advocating pro- and anti-mask stances: both sides appealed to numbers or authority, decried lacking evidence or 'flip-flopping', and invoked the *topos of threat* to legitimise their stance. The presence of starker differences in strategies in the memes across ideological camps may be rooted in the fact that, while both memes and tweets allow users to respond to contemporary events in almost real time, the fully anonymous nature of memes shields users from accountability experienced on

other platforms such as Twitter (Ross and Rivers 2017). However, some discursive strategies did differ in pro- and anti-mask tweets, and they echoed those identified in memes. Anti-mask tweeters relied more heavily on textual elements and strategies that aimed to controvert the notion that media and government agencies are acting in the interest of the common good (Wiggins 2019) and to sow mistrust in authorities and the opposition, to validate conspiracy theories, and to position themselves as more awake to the 'truth'. Pro-mask tweeters, instead, positioned their ideological adversaries as immoral for abstaining from wearing masks, thereby legitimising their stance on moral grounds.

6. Conclusions

In line with recent scholarly work on SM communication, this paper has positioned popular online user-generated content as a worthy object of study grounded in its discursive power and its influential role as a form of (political) expression and participation in modern discourse. The analysis of top memes and tweets has cast light on the construction of the debate surrounding a politically and ideologically fraught cultural standpoint and on the discursive production and fortification of exclusionary talk on both sides of the mask divide. On the one hand, users' visual and textual content appealed to science, moral/civil duty, and attacks on the opposition in their advocacy for the 'mask up' movement; and, on the other, it indexed anti-government, anti-press, and anti-liberal sentiments within an anti-mask message.

Even if there is evidence that people across the political spectrum are wearing masks to a greater extent (Kramer 2020), the ways in which opposing stances have been discursively enacted in the SM communication under study suggest that the mask, once an innocuous medical tool, has become a condensation symbol that carries great emotional and affective power (Graber 1976). In the content analysed, some of the discourse generated by both sides endeavoured to influence by using negative predications, by relying on ambiguities and oversimplifications, and by instilling fear and suspicion, putting truth at risk. In the midst of a pandemic, obfuscating the truth can have significant implications such as impeding the uptake of science-based recommendations.

Furthermore, these discourses can entice conscious or subliminal associations between mask-related behaviours and particular groups, their causes, and their attributions, prejudiced as they may be, thereby exacerbating existing endemic divisions in American society. Given these high costs, awareness of the role of user-generated content in the instrumentalisation of the face mask and the discursive mechanisms deployed in this process can help individuals and institutions formulate interventions better-equipped to combat bigotry, dismantle disinformation, and ultimately serve the common good.

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