



Abstract

At the heart of discourse surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing tension regarding the use of face masks, their efficacy in preventing the spread of the virus, and the extent to which authorities should enforce their use. The debate has led to the instilling of the mask as a symbolic image, weighty with polarized

connotative meanings that depend on the ideological assumptions of different audiences. My research seeks to answer the question: **why are face masks so controversial, and how did they become politicized objects in the public sphere?** This research helps accomplish that aim by applying the theoretical lenses of

science rhetoric and visual rhetoric to anti-mask social media posts, interviews, memes, and protest signs. The foundational ideas and vocabularies of these disciplines allow me to integrate these perspectives throughout the project.

Methods

This analysis of anti-mask discourse uses the classical rhetorical concept of **stasis theory** as an organizing theoretical structure. Developed by ancient rhetoricians as a method of judicial courtroom deliberation, stasis theory provides a series of questions that can be applied to any issue to achieve stasis and pinpoint the specific place where different sides disagree (Crowley and Hawhee 56). The four categories are meant to be addressed in linear order: **conjecture, definition, degree, and procedure.**

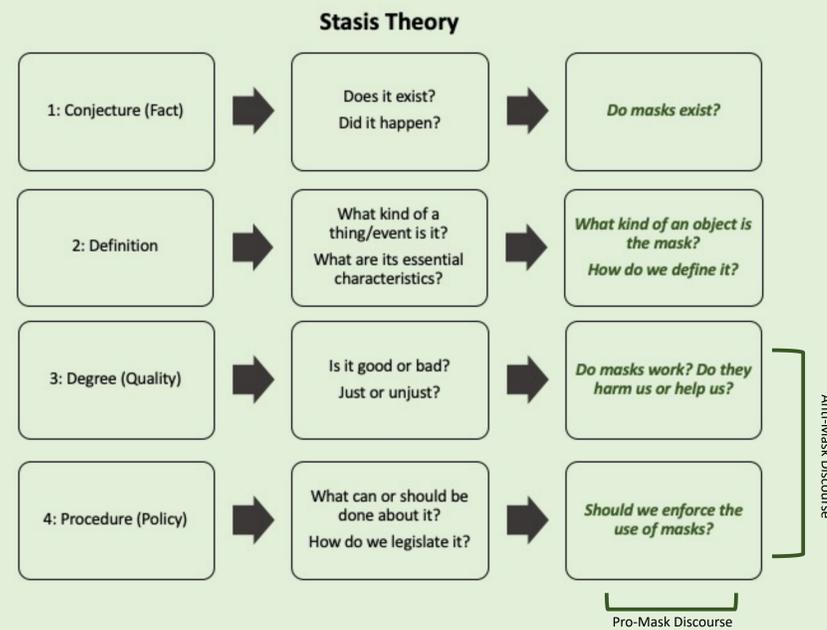


Figure 1: Stasis Theory

Viewed through the lens of stasis theory, it is less surprising that the public's opinion of face masks is so fraught with debate and controversy. The different sides of the mask debate are asking entirely different sets of stasis questions. While anti-mask arguments based in science are attempting to resolve the mask's quality (the third stasis), its efficacy and its impact on the human body, other mask protests forward a redefinition of the face mask and its essential characteristics (the second stasis). This distinction has encouraged me to approach mask arguments from separate analytic frameworks that appropriately reflect the natures of each: the **rhetoric of science** and **visual rhetoric**.

Conclusions and Relevance

As COVID-19 continues to be a public health crisis, this research is not only timely, but essential to a larger conversation about the potentially dangerous ways objective and scientific meaning is obscured when important public health issues are abstracted and symbolized as markers of political ideology. Applying stasis theory helps us gain a better understanding of why current face mask discourse is so unproductive. Mainstream science and its supporters are focusing their efforts on the fourth

stasis by enforcing mask mandates and constantly reiterating "the facts" of scientific consensus. Anti-mask rhetoric shows us, however, that audiences are still misinformed about the third stasis and use the second stasis to shift the argument away from science entirely, using more effective rhetorical appeals to fear and nationalism. This has tremendous implications for science communication. Scientific and medical authorities trying to convey important facts about masking to the general public should use

this information as a way of understanding the way the mask is always symbolized and politicized and is never just about the science. Perhaps incorporating and appropriating anti-mask rhetorical strategies could instead encourage face mask use at the individual level and increase support for mandates. For example, organizations like the CDC could embrace visual rhetoric to change the mask from an authoritarian symbol to a patriotic one, appealing to the nationalism seen throughout anti-mask media.

The Third Stasis: Science-Centric Mask Discourse

- Anti-mask advocates engage with the third stasis by manufacturing **scientific controversy** about them.
 - "A scientific controversy is 'manufactured' in the public sphere," science rhetorician Leah Ceccarelli writes, "when an arguer announces there is an ongoing scientific debate in the technical sphere about a matter for which there is actually an overwhelming scientific consensus" (196).
 - These controversies are maintained by appeals to fairness and artificial symmetry, as well as an oppressive and dogmatic portrayal of mainstream science:

"The only science that we can hear is what Big Pharma wants to put out there. There's other scientists and doctors that are going against this, but they are censored on Big Tech, on Big Media, and that's the problem."
 --Shiva Bagheri (anti-mask activist)

- Other anti-mask science arguments rely on rhetorical appeals to fear (*pathos*) by circulating false claims of **mask-related health issues**.
- One example (see fig. 1), quotes 1931 Nobel Prize winner Dr. Otto Warburg's findings on oxygen and cancer cells.
 - Arguments like this rely on the credibility (*ethos*) provided by scientific-sounding language, emphasizing words like "hypoxia" to invoke legitimacy even when the concepts are not applicable.
 - Scientists like Dr. Warburg serve as heroic figures for the anti-mask movement who are willing to go against established science and speak the truth.



Figure 2: A Viral Anti-Mask Facebook Post

- As a major defender of masking science, Dr. Anthony Fauci shows an awareness of this dogmatic view of science when he tries to portray himself as strictly a scientist, uninvolved in politics.
 - As rhetorician Kenneth Burke says, however, science is rhetorically identified with its social and political contexts and cannot be truly autonomous.

The Second Stasis: Redefining the Mask with Visual Rhetoric

- The American public is unable to have productive conversations of quality and policy about face masks because of a fundamental disagreement and obsession about what the mask *is*, symbolically, and what it means.
- Visual anti-mask rhetoric operates in the second stasis of definition by using visual metaphor and *enthymeme* to **redefine the mask as a political and ideological symbol** of oppressive government and authoritarianism rather than a scientific or medical object.
- This symbolizing happens through **rhetorical homology**, where the formal similarity between two things overshadows their differences in content (Brummett).
 - This leads to labels like "muzzle" being paired with the image of a medical face mask in protest images and memes (see fig 3).
 - Masks and muzzles both cover the mouth, so the symbolic metaphor is easier to construct.
 - These comparisons give the face mask visual **authoritarianism**; masks seem like representations of oppression because they reflect cultural shortcuts for authoritarianism.



Figure 3: An Anti-Mask Protest Sign

- This type of comparison paves the way for Islamophobic anti-mask memes like figure 4, entitled "The Goal of the Left," where the visual similarity between masks and burqas is the only evidence necessary to make a syllogistic argument that one will lead to the other.



Figure 4: An Anti-Mask Meme Image

References

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