Twitter controversy: The right to wear a mask

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**Introduction:**

In the age of technology, it seems like we are always on the web. Constantly sharing, liking, posting, and commenting about the latest news. This is mostly made possible by the expansion of technology within the early 2000’s. This technology wave has changed everything, from the way we conduct business to the way we communicate. We are more connected to each other, and one recent key to that connection has been the hashtag. Through the use of hashtags, people can communicate with one another about a specific topic. For example, let’s say you are writing a post about the Kansas City Chiefs winning the Super Bowl. You could add #superbowl60 to your post, which would share it with other people who search the same hashtag. People often use these hashtags to comment on something they are passionate about or a controversial topic. In this report, I will discuss the hashtag known as masksdontwork.

 There is a debate over whether or not people should be required to wear masks during the coronavirus pandemic. Most health officials say that wearing a mask will reduce the spread of COVID-19, since it is able to block out the droplets of saliva whenever someone coughs or sneezes. At the same time, there is not much evidence to back up this claim as this is new territory for all of us. Most places do not require you to wear a mask in public, even though it is strongly recommended. Furthermore, some people believe that making masks mandatory is infringing on their rights as a US citizen. For these reasons, there are many who choose not to wear a mask. I wanted to take a look at these peoples’ perspectives, which is why I chose to study the #masksdontwork on Twitter. This hashtag is linked with tweets relating to the reasons why some people believe that they should not be required to wear a mask, and even some evidence that cloth masks are entirely ineffective.

**Methods**

In order to begin coding tweets, I had to use the Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet, or Tags, to collect all the tweets that had the hashtag #masksdontwork in them. This tool collected tweets in a spreadsheet, so it was easy for me to go through each individual tweet and code it. When I first looked at the spreadsheet, there were over 3000 tweets. This comes as no surprise since masks have become a very controversial and current topic because of the pandemic. Instead of reading all of the tweets, I randomly chose 100 tweets to use in my coding and analysis. Before coding, I came up with a few categories that I thought would be useful. For example, one category was if the person used emotion or logic to get their point across. Another category I kept track of was the intended audience for the tweet, whether this was replying to someone specific, or just talking to the general public. I also added an open code category, so I could keep track of miscellaneous items that I thought could be helpful later. As I was coding, I noticed that I had to adjust some of the categories as a few of them ended up being insignificant. An instance of this is when I found that 97 out of my 100 tweets were from people who were against wearing masks. This should have been obvious from the beginning, as my hashtag specifically came from people who did not like wearing masks. Regardless, I continued coding more categories that I thought would be more important in my analysis. Although coding was tedious, is was a very important step since it yielded my results.

**Discussion**

After I was finished coding, it was time to take a look at my results. In order to do this, however, I needed to make charts, so it would be easier to see my data. The first chart I made related to the emotion vs logic category. I also decided to separate the number of people who were for and against wearing a mask, so you could visually see the makeup of the people who were using this hashtag. As we can see in Figure 1, the majority of the people are opposed to mask wearing, which comes as no surprise. However, what is surprising is the number of people who used logic in their tweet. Given that it it is a social media platform, we might more readily expect tweets with high levels of emotion. Usually social media is a form where people can express their opinions on certain topics, but not always in a rationale or coherent sense. I investigated a little further into this and found that there were a lot of people who have been using Twitter specifically to reach out to a larger number or people. According to the article “NATIONAL POLITICS ON TWITTER,” Julian Ausserhofer says that even politicians have been using twitter as a way to get their point across. As I was coding, I noticed that a significant percentage of the people who used logic added an article or picture to show evidence that wearing a mask is not effective and can even be detrimental to your health. These articles and videos make their argument more credible and thus are more likely to persuade people to not wear a mask. One initial conclusion, then, is that people tweeting with the #masksdontwork hashtag are quite often using logic as well as emotion.

Figure 1. Emotion or logic in tweets for or against masks

 One other category that I examined was whether or not the person tweeting was replying to someone specific or writing for the general public. In figure 2, we see a pretty even split. However, I found that the type of tweets were very different. For instance, when someone was speaking to the general public, they would usually give their opinion while using logic to explain their point of view. In contrast, most of the people who were replying to someone specific, were using emotion or pathos. One example of this is when one user said that using a mask in public should not be mandatory as it contradicts the rights of citizens. This is a huge point of contention, as there are many people who believe that being required to wear a mask is unconstitutional. One Twitter user wrote that he would never go in any stores that required them to wear one! In contrast, another Twitter user wrote that it is legal to require masks, since not wearing a mask can and potentially transmit the virus and harm others. I found out that this is accurate as the reason for wearing a mask is “not to protect you from others, but to protect others from you,” says Christopher Labos, writer of the article “Cloth masks get the thumbs-up, but do they work.” This is similar to the ban on smoking in certain areas, as smoking can be detrimental to others. It is also important to point out that the person who is in charge of the facility should be in charge of what the laws are. Chuck Stebbins from the article “No-smoking laws erode personal freedoms” argues that if “you own it, you decide what to do with it.” In spite of this, this is different than the seat belt law since the only person you are hurting is yourself if an accident were to occur (Curtis 2017). As Miller James from the article “Taking away personal freedoms” likes to put it, “[I] don't see how you are putting others at danger by not wearing your own seat belt.”

Figure 2

While I was coding the “open” category, I decided to write down some of the things that were intended in the tweet. Figure 3 shows that most of the tweets were intended for informing the public, or to share an opinion. However, this does not discount some the more random categories such as humor and hashtags.

Figure 3

In total, I found that working with Twitter hashtags can be a great way to gather a lot of information, and you may be surprised at what you might find. Although it is tedious and takes a lot of hard work, the results are surely worth it and I would encourage anyone to take a second look to the tweets you read on Twitter. hashtags can be a great way to gather a lot of information, and you may be surprised at what you might find. Although it is tedious and takes a lot of hard work, the results are surely worth it and I would encourage anyone to take a second look to the tweets you read on Twitter.

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