



## **Reflexive Doubt In Expert Systems: Mask Compliance During COVID-19**

By: **Pia A. Albinsson**, Merlyn A. Griffiths, and B. Yasanthi Perera

### **Abstract**

As COVID-19 progresses, expert systems such as the CDC and WHO continually disseminate information about its spread. Municipal, state, and federal leaders have vacillated in their messaging about mask-wear, a key protection measure to minimize transmission. Some consumers have interpreted this lack of clarity and transparency as indecisiveness, thereby instilling distrust in expert systems. To a large extent, consumers' misgivings and subsequent behaviors center on personal and societal rights and responsibilities. Drawing on consumer research on institutional theory, this article examines current public discourse regarding recommended and mandated mask-wear as a means of personal protection for U.S. consumers. This work contributes to the literature on expert systems and ideological structures that shape consumer choice and compliance/non-compliance in response to regulatory mandates.

**Albinsson PA**, Griffiths MA, Perera BY. Reflexive Doubt in Expert Systems: Mask Compliance during COVID-19. *Society for Marketing Advances Proceedings*. November 2020:33-34. Publisher version of record available at: <https://www.societyformarketingadvances.org/Conference-Proceedings>

# Reflexive Doubt in Expert Systems: Mask Compliance during COVID-19

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## Introduction

Those which generate and has access to credible information and data which allows for informed decision making, such as local and global leaders, government agencies, and research driven organizations are considered expert systems. In the case of COVID-19, inconsistent messaging by government officials and health experts has jeopardized consumers' trust in expert systems that are charged with assessing and managing systemic risk across a population (Giddens 1991). Despite its initial reluctance, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended face masks as a preventative measure in June 2020, long after the surge of Coronavirus-related deaths. To some, this delay implied that the severity of the virus was initially exaggerated. With leaders world over urging citizens to wear masks to curtail Covid-19, consumers must comply to garner the desired benefits. The pandemic imposes lifestyle restrictions on taken-for-granted liberties of everyday life and threatens individual and societal well-being. In the U.S., instead of simply being a public health directive, the wearing of face masks has assumed a partisan flavor with pro versus anti-mask wearing factions. Given the pandemic's severity and public cooperation necessary to effectively combat this disease, we seek to understand consumers' underlying rationale for complying with or resisting face coverings mandates by examining the public discourse on this issue.

## Literature Review

Extant research on legitimacy of products/ services and practices, examines how marketplace myths have restored consumers' trust in various expert systems (Henry 2010; Humphreys and Thompson 2014). While some consumers are likely to comply with town, city, state ordinances and mandates, others have taken a 'my right my choice' stance as a means of legitimizing their non-compliance decision. The current societal discourse on protective measures and some consumers' negative reactions, indicate a deeper incidence of reflexive doubt in institutions including government, and science-based public expert systems (e.g., the WHO and the CDC). Consumers are often disconnected in the marketplace, but may mobilize and engage in consumer activism when faced with a common threat (Henry 2010). In the case of mask mandates, the threat is perceived as encroachment on personal rights and individual right to choose. Thus, when consumers' choices or practices are constrained, they may voice their frustrations by gathering at rallies or engaging in online activism to protest the perceived infringement of rights (Albinsson and Perera 2013; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). For some, online activism entails sharing their reactions and view in relation to specific media reports, and these expressions and opinions shared in online forums, are the sources that inform this study.

## Method

Public discourse from online news forums/ comment sections were coded by three independent coders. While eighty-nine articles published in mainstream U.S. news media between March and July 2020 discussed mask wear,

some did not allow for comments or had a minimal number (>100) of comments. Most notable was the political lens through which the articles were published. The researchers identified six articles (two each from left leaning, right leaning, and neutral publications as deemed by a consumer poll) and, guided by theory, engaged in a thematic analysis (Charmaz 2006) of the associated comments.

### **Preliminary Findings**

A recursive analysis of the data indicates that both groups hold distinct views of rights in relation to the individual, and to the collective community. With what we interpret as differing worldviews, the data indicates that in discussions of community, those who are non-compliant view “community” in terms of their responsibility to those closest to them (i.e., family) whereas those who are advocating for mandates regard it in broader terms by expressing their responsibility to society. Relatedly, those who are non-compliant believe that mandates violate their right to freedom, and they react by exercising this right through non-compliance and protest. However, there is little, if any, reference to others' rights to health and life, nor the fact that rights come with responsibilities. In contrast, those who are compliant appear to be aware of their responsibility to the community in terms of public health and societal well-being. Consequently, each group seems to have developed an “us versus them” stance, with friction fueled by differing worldviews, which appears to influence their interpretation of various expert systems' communication. Moreover, irrespective of whether they are compliant or non-compliant, based on values, exposure to information, education, political and other affiliations, and the like, individuals appear to have developed a negative view of those with dissenting opinions. Over time, there is an intertwining effect with these various influences feeding into one another to create further polarization.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Consumers mobilize to protect their rights in numerous venues including anti-mask rallies, through voicing their opinions in online news forums, and by not wearing a mask. Although forgoing a mask can be viewed as risky consumption, our findings show that those consumers who think of themselves as “me, myself, and I” and therefore have a individualistic frame of reference are inclined to take greater risk-taking tendencies (i.e., no mask). The opposite is true for consumers who think of themselves as members of a group, and are risk-averse thereby avoiding pain and loss (i.e. wear a mask). At this point, the pandemic has taken more than 1,000,000 lives globally (September 2020) and over 200,000 lives in the U.S. alone. As society is still very much under threat, research that focuses on unearthing consumers' sentiments regarding preventive measures is important. Implications for marketers and public policy is discussed.

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