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What Are Mothers Communicating About Masks During COVID-19?

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## Topic

I researched the topic of COVID-19. This topic is big and has lots of different facets and angles. Specifically, I researched how mothers are communicating to their children about wearing masks in regard to COVID-19 using an interpretive lens which will allow me to use individuals' experiences in my research. I used the research subfield of health communication to help shape my research and provide structure to my information. This research brought about a well-rounded idea of how mothers are communicating about masks and what they are saying to their children about wearing masks amidst COVID-19. I also used symbolic interactionism to shape my research because masks are a symbol therefore the perspective, ideas, and opinions could be different in each individual. There are many questions I, as a researcher could have asked about this topic, but I narrowed in on one. During the global pandemic, COVID-19, what are mothers communicating to their children about wearing masks?

This topic is important because this is the thing that scientists are saying will help stop the spread of COVID-19. Mothers tend to be more careful and nurturing so, hearing their side of what they are communicating to their children about wearing masks and why they wear masks or don't wear masks is a key part of knowing how society feels as a whole. This study is needed because as a societal whole we are all over the place when it comes to the communication about masks and getting a well-rounded research base of information could help bring light to why mothers are feeling the way they are about masks. This information if presented in a public forum could allow other people to really know the heart behind mothers reasonings about masks and could potentially make effective change in the hearts of people in our society or maybe just allow them to see a different perspective.

## Literature Review

All of these articles are in relation to Health Communication and I am using them to look at the communication that moms are sharing with their children on masks and the attitudes towards them. This is important because it allows me to draw common ideas between different scholarly sources and bring the important similarities to light. The three themes I looked at are, effective communication, people's demeanor and the government's role. This research is important because mask wearing in America is so new and the information and research just isn't out there for people to learn and understand from. These themes allowed me to use resources to draw connections to my interviewee's thoughts and ideas.

The first theme I am going to look at is effective communication. Lee, S., & Basnyat, I. (2013), speak about what the top two things to stop the disease is a vaccine and communication. The importance of communicating the right information correctly is the difference between containing a virus and not containing it. The second article that supports this theme is *Health Related Disaster* and this article talks about effective communication in relation to social media. Because social media is something that almost everyone looks at multiple times a day this has become a way for information to be communicated immediately. But this article says that it needs to be done carefully and intentionally while making sure that the information is true and clear to every reader that will come across it. It needs to communicate to the person that knows a lot about medical terms and someone who has never heard a sophisticated medical term ever before. This next theme flows directly from this theme and reflects on how people feel about that information and their attitudes towards it (Eckert, S., Sopory, P., et.al).

The next theme I am going to talk about is people's demeanor towards wearing masks. The first article that talks about this is *Clicking Social Media*. This article talks about the fear

arousal. Fear is absolutely a huge factor for people to wear masks. Some social media outlets have used fear to get people to change their behavior and some listeners actively respond to that fear by wearing a mask even where it is not required and some people respond to that fear by refusing to wear the mask at all (Zhang, X., & Zhou, S. (2019)). The second article that speaks on people's demeanor is, *Experiencing the Pandemic*, this article is written by a man who lived through the initial pandemic and saw both China's response and Austria's response. He said that at first people's demeanor was nervous but still unsure about the harshness of the virus but then in a matter of three weeks masks were sold out everywhere and every single person had one on. When he got to Austria the demeanor was different and not very many people were wearing masks because they did not believe the virus was anything more than the flu. The government's role in both countries was critical to the demeanor of the people that lived there (Zhao, X. (2020)). The idea that uncertainty causes people to make poor decisions or not know what decision to make is a part of people's demeanor towards health communication. In the article *Avoiding Health Communication* they raise the idea that when people interact with the health information being communicated to them it can cause more uncertainty because the information is too much for them to handle and too many possibilities arise and they don't know what to act on and what not to act on (Barbour, J., Rintamaki, L., Ramsey, J., & Brashers, D. (2012))

The next theme I am going to talk about is the government's role. Lee, S., & Basnyat, I. (2013), say that the way the government puts out the rules and regulations mostly determine the way people are going to act and respond. The government's role according to this article is to be able to have the facts and inform the public of what they need to do and not to contradict themselves because that leaves people confused, and it doesn't create a group mentality. The second article that talks about the government's role is *Effects of Message Framing*. This article

talks about the government's role is regards to releasing a vaccine. This is quite possibly the most valuable thing to stop this pandemic and it is in the hands of the government to facilitate it properly once it is created. All these themes play a significant role in this pandemic, but these articles do not cover all the information needed to come to a conclusion about masks and what people really think of them (Kim, S., Pjesivac, I., & Jin, Y. (2019). In conclusion, these resources lead me to still need the answer to the question “What are Mothers Communicating to their children about wearing masks?”

### **Methodology**

To study this topic, I used the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm uses people’s individual experiences to do their research. In the interpretive paradigm the researcher makes it a priority to have a relationship with its subjects to be able to understand their individual perspectives. According to Lindof and Taylor (2019), the interpretive paradigm does not focus on numbers and statistics rather participant observation and interviewing (p.19). They also add that “reality is prolific and emerges between humans through their symbolic activities of expression and interpretation. (p.19)” This will allow me to use personal experience and opinion in my research. Mothers are usually much more detail oriented and descriptive which is one of the reasons I chose that group of people to use for my research. Using an interview focused research paradigm allowed me to really get into the minds of the mothers and craft a solid idea on how they feel towards masks.

The research method I used was respondent interviews. This type of interview allowed for the most open and flowing conversation to really be able to understand why the mothers are communicating, what they are communicating about masks, to their children and what makes up their perception. According to Lindof and Taylor (2019), a respondent interviews purpose is to

elicit open ended responses. The interview is focused on hearing people's lived experiences about the questions the researcher is asking (p. 229). This is type of interview was perfect for my research question because I need to know what they are communicating to their children about masks and that comes from lived experiences throughout this pandemic. An example of questions I asked are,

- How do you feel when you see someone in the grocery store not wearing a mask?
  - If you feel they should be wearing one, do you feel strongly enough to say something?
- Do you believe that masks help to stop the spread of the virus?
- Do you wear a mask in places that do not require you to?
  - Follow up: How did you come to make that decision?
- What is the reason you wear your mask?
  - Is it because you are forced to?
- Do you wear it for your safety or for the people around you? (or both)
- If you'd choose to not wear the mask if you weren't forced too,
  - How do you come to that decision?
- When speaking to your young adult children about masks what are you saying to them?
  - If your child give you push back on wearing a mask what are the things you are saying to convince them wearing a mask is the right thing to do?
  - Or are you not telling them to wear one at all?
- If you found out your child wasn't wearing a mask when they were supposed to what would your reaction be?

- Lastly, has your opinion changed since March 2020 on masks and how has it evolved and changed if so?
- Has this affected the way you communicate to your children about masks and if so in what way?

### **Ethical Comments and Data Collection**

After being approved by the IRB board, I interviewed five mothers in the city of St. Louis who all had children in the first grade. I posted in a few local Facebook groups and asked for volunteer interviewees so that I could get a variety of mothers apart from the people in my life. I asked the volunteers to private message me rather than comment on the post to be protective of their view points, opinions, and safety. I also had each of them sign a consent form so that they knew the risks of participating in my study. I also got verbal consent from each mother to record the interviewees before conducting them.

### **Methodology Continued**

The theoretical framework I used for this research topic is symbolic interactionism. According to Lindof and Taylor (2019), this theory explains the meaning people put to an object, place, or person. They also state that this theory states that people can have different meaning for things and that it can change with different experiences (p. 58). One person could look at a mask as a way of protection where another person could look at a mask as an act of obedience of the government or an annoyance or inconvenience. This theory will help me figure out people's attitudes towards masks. This can be a key piece of evidence to my research to understand how mothers are associating with a masks and how they are relaying that to their children. Lindof and Taylor also say that interviewees can be influenced by others and it can cause them to shape their answer differently. Therefore, I did all my interviews one on one over the phone not using video

to make every interviewee as comfortable as possible. Overall, the question of what mothers are communicating to their child about wearing masks during COVID-19 is the question that I answered and discussed.

### **Findings**

After conducting my five interviews I was able to analyze the conversations I had with each mother. Analyzing this data was intriguing and exciting. But before I began to analyze that data I had to remember one of the important aspects of grounded theory and that is that even though I can never analyze from a completely blank slate that I needed to be aware of my bias to the topic at hand. After self-reflection I analyzed the data using the lens of grounded theory. I put the data into categories and was able to draw conclusions and thematic meanings that were alike from all five of my interviewees. Because all my interviews were seemingly identical in the overarching answers, in my conclusions I was actually able to claim those themes as truth because it was drawn from 100% of my interviews.

To continue, all three themes were directly connected between all five interviews. The first theme was autonomy over what mask the child was going to wear. All five mothers said that they allowed their child to choose their first masks. Most of them actually said it was kind of an exciting thing for the kids, as some kids picked a mask with their favorite color with sparkles on it or they picked one with their favorite character from their favorite show. This factor of allowing their child to choose something that could have potentially been a hard thing to get a child to do was a perfect strategy. Not only did the mothers accomplish keeping their child safe, they made it seem like it was their idea by allowing them a choice in what kind of mask they wanted to wear.

The second theme that I found was honesty. The mothers used a strategy of being honest when telling their child about why they had to wear a mask. All five mothers said they remember their first conversation with their child about wearing a mask went something like, 'we are going to wear masks because it keeps us safe, and it keeps others safe.' I believe because the parents were honest the child knew that they were serious. Each mom said that their first conversation about masks happened early after the first shut down. These conversations were not long ones either, the children were basically just listening to what their mothers said. This is exactly why when information comes from a trusted source and is consistent that people are more willing to trust that information.

The third theme that I found is compliancy. All five mothers said that their children were compliant with wearing masks and never really gave any push back on wearing them. The children were so trusting and understanding of the fact that they are trying to stay safe and keeps others safe that they just did what they were told. This is an interesting find because wearing a mask seems to be one of the most controversial things that you can ask a person to do in today's world, yet children are just doing it because they are being told it is what is best for everyone. Like I said in the prior paragraph, therefore when we trust our information source it is so much more likely that when health communication is shared that people will listen. The fact that there has been such conflicting information around masks is why I think that it is harder for some adults to trust it. But because these first graders were only getting their information from their mothers and their mothers stayed consistent, they followed directions willingly and without hesitation.

### **Conclusion**

Lastly, there were some limitations to my study that put a roadblock of how strong of a conclusion I could really draw. The biggest limitation was the sample size. I was only allowed to interview five mothers therefore trying to draw a conclusion about what all mothers are communicating to their kids about masks during COVID-19 was a difficult sell. If I were to continue this research or if someone else were to continue this research, I would recommend using a much larger sample size. This would allow the researcher to state a claim that I or they could be confident in backing because of the sample size. I would also recommend doing some observing as well to be able to see things that maybe mothers wouldn't think to share during an interview and be able to see natural reactions and in the moment, decision making about masks.

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