THE WORDS OF COVID-19: Brazil

mask saves (#mascarasalva)

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Abstract:

Portuguese:

Esta entrada 'hashtag' (**#) MascaraSalva** é registrada e analizada contextualmente aqui. O objetivo é: a- definir etimologicamente as palavras 'mascara' e 'salva'; b- relacionar suas particularidades culturais; c- problematizar o uso hashtag 'mascarasalva' e descrever as estratégias de comunicação em que a expressão é veiculada e vinculada ao objeto 'mascara facial' ; d- analizar como o seu uso pode subverter, ou seja, como a expressão pode manipular ou ser manipulada para atingir certas metas; e- e por último, discutir o uso hashtag 'mascarasalva' em relação ao uso da máscara facial em um nível psicológico.

#MascaraSalva é lançada em conjunto a uma campanha nacional pública e privada (entitulada como *Todos pela Saúde*) para concientizar a população brasileira a usar a mascara facial como método de prevenção na propagação do virus corona. Paralelamente, **#MascaraSalva** é manipulada como instrumento politico contra a postura do presidente do Brasil, Jair Bolsonaro, que é criticado por ignorar os riscos da pandemia à população brasileira. O uso de celebridades nacionais usando máscara facial para divulgar a campanha *Todos pela Saude* ganha presença virtual nas redes sociais, incentivando os seus seguidores a usar a mascara facial em locais públicos. As mensagens no Tweeter que acompanham a **#MascaraSalva** são enviadas or reenviadas por individuos ou empresas que conformam com esse novo hábito que se torna obrigatório em alguns municípios ou regiões. O que se pode observar é que a máscara facial acaba ganhando um status de 'salvadora' quando associada metaforicamente à estátua do Cristo Redentor, que é reconhecido como simbolo nacional.

Por fim, esta entrada discute como emoções de medo (ou mesmo terror) acompanhado de ansiedade poderm levar individuos a apoiar **#MascaraSalva** e a se conformarem com essa nova normal sem se respaldarem em um embasamento cientifico na prevenção de propagação do virus corona. Ao invés disso, as máscaras facias ganham popularidade por se tornarem uma peça de moda, e um objeto de consumo obrigratório, com o apoio **'#MascaraSalva'** circulando pela media.

English:

This entry consists of the Brazilian **#MascaraSalva** seen across social media, mainly Twitter, as part of a national campaign to raise population's awareness of face masks as a form of preventative measure against the spreading of the coronavirus. It started trending in May 2020 across Twitter with the support of local celebrities to divulge the message. The objective of this entry is to identify the hashtag as an expression of Otherness, through its analysis and discussion in the Brazilian social context. In other words, this entry aims to show how the (cloth) face mask has become an object manipulated for fashion and for political agenda, while overlooking its scientific foundation during the pandemic and its implications to a collective psychology.

Etymology:

#MascaraSalva

The hashtag **MascaraSalva** in Brazilian Portuguese is used as a compound word by the combination of the noun **mascara** (mask in English) and the verb **salvar** (to save in English).

1- Mask (noun) in English - Mascara (noun) in Portuguese

The etymology of the word **máscara** with its English translation **mask** share a common root. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary (OED), the word **mask** comes from Medieval Latin 'masca' that means 'mask, specter, nightmare', originating the word 'maschera' in Italian, and eventually 'mascara' in Portuguese. Although the root 'masca' has an unknown origin, it is believed that the root may have both Germanic origins, as seen in the word 'maska' which relates to the color 'red', and Celtic origins that relates, to a first instance, to the notion of 'black' or 'smudge', and posteriorly, to 'witch' . Another theory defends that the word **mask** has come from the Arabic origin 'maskharah', meaning "buffoon, mockery" (OED), implying distrust.

Either the Germanic/Celtic or the Arabic origins of word **mask** imply an act of smudging or blackening a person's face with an intention of scaring others. As Raz mentions, "All these terms refer to concealment, disguise, deceit – in short, everything that society condemns and rejects in the framework of its principal values. The mask is connected with an alternative reality, but not necessarily a decent one" (213).

In the English language, the word **mask** appeared in the 1530s to mean a face cover "with opening for the eyes and mouth" as indicated in OED; later, around 1570s, the word **mask** gained a figurative use to refer to "anything used or practiced for disguise or concealment" (OED).

2- To Save (verb) in English – Salvar (verb) in Portuguese

The verb **to save** has its origins in the following Latin roots: a- 'salvus' which refers to "uninjured, in good health, safe"; b- 'salus' that means "good health"; and c- 'solidus' meaning "solid". The Latin root 'salvus' has its origins in the Proto-Indo-European *sol-, which means "whole, well-kept" as stated in OED.

The verb **save** enter the English lexical around XIII century meaning to "rescue from peril, bring to safety," and "prevent from death". It also shares a theological meaning that refers to "deliver from sin or its consequences; admit to eternal life; gain salvation" (OED), from which the word 'savior' originates.

Cultural specificity:

The worldwide Covid 19 virus pandemic has certainly aggravated and destabilized the already vulnerable countries that have been facing internal political crisis. Brazil is one of them. The current Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro, has been on local and global news headlines for his notorious attitudes during the pandemic, be for his careless attitude or poor leadership skills to promote sanitary safety for the Brazilian population. In response to this, a group of private bankers, medical professionals, and local corporations have joined forces to create a project called *Todos Pela Saude* (All for Health), kicking off a campaign with the hashtag **MascaraSalva** on May 1st, 2020 across the social media.

The campaign has invited the participation of national celebrities such as popular singers, Roberto Carlos and Ivete Sangalo, to endorse the use of face masks in public spaces, as seen in the following websites, respectively:

https://www.facebook.com/RobertoCarlosOficial/videos/mascarasalva/682388239261389/



Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Alpm9XShSBc

The use of celebrities as exemplary models for the mass to follow has been a frequent strategy in marketing and in political campaigns. In the case of Covid 19, celebrities have been used as models to endorse this 'new normal' by wearing fashionable cloth face masks as seen in the pictures, as part of the movement 'Todos Pela Saúde'.

This new habit of wearing cloth face mask has been framed within the concept of **self-care** and **care** seen across the social media like Twitter with the hashtag **MascaraSalva,** as shown in some Tweeter messages here:

@chevroletbrasil @AudiBR @FiatBR @FordBrasil @JeepdoBrasil @RenaultBrasil @vwbrasilA gente gostou muito que você tá de máscara, @chevroletbrasil, e que também chamou todo mundo pra colocar. Usar a máscara é uma demonstração de carinho e cuidado com o próximo. #MascaraSalva

(Translation: We like it very much that you are wearing the mask, and that you have called out everyone's attention to to wear it too. To use a face mask is a proof of self-care and care about the other. #MascaraSalva)

Similar messages have been sent across the Twitter to endorse the wearing of face masks for the sake of self-care/care which leads to moral obligations rather than medical needs. The wearing of cloth face masks outside health-care settings by 'healthy population' has been a contested matter which has provoked the creation of worldwide groups of 'anti-maskers'. This is seen because of the lack of scientific consensus among authorities such as WHO and the medical community in terms of approving mandatory use of (cloth) face masks to healthy population; instead, they opt for recommendations and let local authorities and government boards decide according to their country's specificities and needs. Interestingly, the Brazilian context seems *suis generis*, in which an 'anti-mask' attitude is supported by the presidential government rather than by its citizens.

Problematization:

By adhering and supporting the campaign **#MascaraSalva**, Brazilian citizens express their disapproval to their President, mainly after his notorious response to the media, by saying "and So what?", which shows that Bolsonaro neither fears the virus nor the death that lurks around the country. His citizens lose trust in his governance for not being a 'good enough president' that can foster citizens' resilience; instead, Bolsonaro is seen as an abusive caretaker who neglects his nation when most needed. In this manner, the campaign **#MascaraSalva** gains political meaning, as Brazilian citizens decide to use the hashtag across social media and to wear the cloth face mask to protest against Bolsonaro's poor leadership. Thus, **#MascarSalva** movement symbolizes Brazilians' discontentment and their shaming for the president.

The movement **#MascaraSalva** gains momentum as it spreads its message across social media. Yet, the messages along with the hashtag create peer-pressure and social conformity; in other words, the ones who conform by spreading the message wear a mask based on their political convictions rather than on their scientific knowledge. As expected, the mass population are not likely to search for scientific evidences to confirm the functionality of (cloth) face masks; however, the very few that may do it, will probably find some arguments towards preventative measures but not evidences of saving lives.

The association of the cloth face masks to the idea of salvation is inspired by the country's official religious identity to Christianity, which represents Jesus Christ as the Saviour, that is, the One sent by God to save (i.e. redeem) human beings from their original sins. The allusion of the mask to the image of the Saviour reinforces the idea that face masks can save the Brazilian population from the coronavirus pandemic.

Lacerda, A. (2020) #MascaraSalva. Cristo Redentor Usa Máscara

This is visually articulated by the local media when broadcasting "The Redeemer" - a famous gigantic statue of Jesus Christ situated on the top of a hill in the City of Rio de Janeiro - 'wearing' a face mask. On the evening of May 3rd, 2020, as a result of special lighting effects, the statue was shown with a mask in order to launch the campaign **#MascaraSalva** across the country. Thus, simply linking the cloth face masks to the idea of divine protection overwrites any scientific rationale that attempts to provide evidences for the effectiveness of cloth face masks for the

general public (Mahase 2020).

Communication strategies:

The **#MascaraSalva** movement is conveyed by social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) with its focus on delivering convincing messages through well-elaborated rhetorical strategies that can stir up audience's emotions.

The messages that accompany the hashtag MascaraSalva in a tone of conformity with the 'new normal' share illocutionary forces such as of raising awareness, self-caring, caring about the other, and shaming, as seen in the following examples:

- *Gente, qual é o problema da pessoa concordar em utilizar máscara em locais fechados em plena pandemia de #coronavirus? Se ela não acredita , q pelo menos tenha senso de coletividade e coloque a bendita da máscara. Q mania em querer transgredir td #MascaraSalva*

(Translation: Hey, folks, what's the problem of not agreeing with wearing the masks at indoor spaces during the pandemic of #coronavirus? If they don't believe it, at least they should have a sense of collectivity, and use the damn mask. What a crazy thing to always want to transgress everything #MascaraSalva)

- *Preguiça desse povo que se acha macho demais pra usar máscara, viu? #MascaraSalva*

(Translation: How lazy are these folks who think of themselves 'macho' enough to use the mask, see? #MascaraSalva)

While these two examples evoke moral obligations in relation to the the face masks at a symbolic level, there are other examples of messages that accompany #MascaraSalva just to emphasize the mask as a new trend or commodity. See the example below:

- Olha como é linda nossa máscara! Ela tem todo o toque de feminilidade e com essa estampa triangular, também é moderna! Legal demais né? Garanta já a sua máscara #MascaraSalva

(Translation: Look how beautiful our face mask is! It has a feminine touch, and this triangular pattern is also modern! How nice, isn't it? Make sure to order yours soon. #MascaraSalva)

Subversion:

Under the discourse of 'unprecedented time', new government policies are established without democratic strategies, with the intention of changing peoples' routine abruptly. This triggers individuals' and society's stress, fear and anxiety, as seen in the case of Brazil which has been exacerbated by internal political crisis. Brazilians resort to post messages and their following of the **#MarscaraSalva** is seen as a form of coping mechanism to organize the mess that the new normal has created. A famous British pediatrician and psychoanalyst named Donald Winnicott once stated that an "organized nonsense is already a defense, just as organized chaos is a denial of chaos" (75). For example, the act of tweeting conforming messages with **#MascaraSalva** is an attempt to find some sense in the nonsense, to handle the uncertainties, and to navigate through contested discourses spread by public health authorities, scientific communities, and government offices.

The individuals and organizations that join the movement and share **#MascaraSalva** across social media seem to conform with the 'new normal' in order to find some internal balance amid uncertain times under the coronavirus chaos. By sharing **#MascaraSalva** along with messages that evoke moral obligations, individuals use social media like Twitter to reinforce peer pressure and in-group thinking while the audience may internalize those messages without questioning the validity of the information, the ethics, and the common sense. The messages along the **#MascaraSalva** hold communicative praxis with the intention of changing society's habits. In other words, to conform with wearing a face mask is to believe in the statement that 'masks save'; therefore, we should wear one.

With this in mind, social identity is created, as one's beliefs and actions (i.e. behavior change) belong to the group that wears face masks in contrast to the one that does not. In this train of thought, **#MascaraSalva** conforms with the mainstream narratives that are not aligned with the Brazilian President's. Thus, **#MascaraSalva** subverts Bolsonaro's presidential speeches.

Discussion:

To conform to the campaign **#MascaraSalva** means that people believe in the idea that masks can save and they must be worn in public areas. Thus, conformity here involves beliefs and actions that a group can control, and if you adhere to them, you will become part of a 'face mask community', receiving their approval and trust, and granting you a certain identity.

The argument of conformity is strongly constructed on the grounds of self-care and care for the others (dearest ones) and on the consciousness of 'saving' oneself and the other; otherwise, the rationale is that you are putting one's life into risk when infected or infecting the others. Wearing a face mask in public space is a symbol that identifies you as a compassionate person who cares for others, a responsible citizen, and an empathetic human being. Thus, the success of the campaign **#MascaraSalva** relies on moral obligations.

Nevertheless, the campaign **#MascaraSalva** ignores the economic inequalities that are well-known in Brazil. To protect oneself, (medical) face masks are advised to be worn for a period of four hours and then they should be removed and thrown away. This implies high costs to users if they follow the public health instructions. To compensate it, **#MascaraSalva** seems to advocate cloth face masks through a rhetoric of fashion. However, good quality ones are not affordable to the majority of the population, who end up buying home-made cloth face masks that may not follow guidelines from public health organizations. In this case, cloth face masks can become detrimental to the users' health. Thus, spreading the message **#MascaraSalva** without considering economic inequalities in favor of reinforcing a conformist behavior from the audience, and eventually from the mass population, becomes a social issue encapsulated in a political agenda.

#MascaraSalva campaign may have its own merits in the fight against the coronavirus. However, we should not ignore what lies underneath an argument of conformity: our deep emotions, i.e. our fears of an unknown virus that can lead to stress and anxiety. The presence of a face mask reminds us of infection, sickness, death. Still, for others, it can trigger personal traumatic experiences. In order to masquerade human beings' fear of the virus, the face masks are branded and advertised as an outfit, with beautiful homemade designs, in vibrant colors, motifs, textures, and different sizes (babies, children, youth, and adults), widely circulated across the internet. It conforms with fashion, commodity, and fetishism.

Moreover, as a stand-alone object, the face mask becomes personified, or better, deified with its power to save humanity, as some twitter messages have shown. The visual rhetoric of The Redeemer statue - the country's cultural icon - with a face mask reinforces the campaign **#MascaraSalva** with a religious tone: masks can save us from the virus. However, transferring a belief to a disposable object might create false hopes.

References/Further Readings:

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Further Reading:

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