

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Same pandemic, different rhetorics: Distinguishing between rational and coercive fear appeals in Filipino Covid-19 discourses

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### ABSTRACT

Fear appeals used in Filipino COVID-19 discourses are diverse in their strategies, motivations, uses, and forms. On the one hand, some fear appeals, such as showing graphic images of COVID-19 patients to persuade people to follow quarantine protocols, tend to be rational in their approach and underline the importance of adhering to recommended health protocols to avoid contracting the virus. Other fear appeals, on the other hand, such as threatening to shoot those who do not follow quarantine protocols, tend to be more coercive in their approach and use punitive measures as threats. However, socio-psychological definitions of “fear appeal” often fail to recognize these differences in rhetorical strategy and instead conflate all fear appeals into a single genre of persuasive messaging. This conflation becomes problematic as it blurs rhetorical, ethical, and situational nuances present in COVID-19 fear appeals.

The purpose of this essay is to fill this conceptual gap by developing a working framework for distinguishing between rational and coercive fear appeals in COVID-19 discourses. First, it surveys Aristotle’s philosophical works on fear appeals in *Rhetoric*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Politics* to construct a rhetorical definition of “fear appeal” as a strategic utterance that uses fear to inspire either courage or cowardice among a polity when confronted with a threat. Second, it locates the exigencies of COVID-19 fear appeals in two rhetorical situations: medical and militaristic, in which the pandemic is framed as either a medical problem requiring medical solutions or a security problem requiring punitive interventions. Finally, it distinguishes between rational fear appeals characteristic of medical rhetorics and coercive fear appeals characteristic of militaristic rhetorics in terms of rhetor-audience relationship, objects of fear, logic and *telos* of argumentation, and form.

**Keywords:** *Fear appeals, Coercion, COVID-19, Medical Populism, Rhetoric*

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### Introduction

Fear appeals are described in health and risk communication as persuasive messages that generate fear by depicting a relevant and significant threat in order to convince audiences to adopt recommended behaviors to avoid such threat (Putwain et al., 2017; Tannenbaum et al., 2015; Witte, 1994; Witte & Allen, 2000). Fear appeals have been used in the communication about COVID-19 to persuade audiences to adopt good health practices such as observing quarantine protocols, wearing face masks, or getting vaccinated (Biana & Joaquin, 2020; Chou & Budenz, 2020; Guttman & Lev, 2021; Stolow et al., 2020).

However, not all fear appeals are the same. Fear appeals have taken various forms, strategies, and uses in Filipino COVID-19 discourses, ranging from social media ads depicting graphic images of COVID-19 patients suffering to encourage proper health behaviors to the Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte, telling the police and military to “shoot” quarantine violators (Hapal, 2021; Lasco, 2020; Madarang, 2021; Tomacruz, 2020). Such differences highlight the limitations of empirical definitions of fear appeals in separating the ethico-rhetorical nuances of COVID-19 discourses. As a result, a definition of “fear appeal” that avoids combining all fear appeals under one broad definition that ignores rhetorical, ethical, and situational nuances is required.

This essay attempts to bridge this conceptual gap by developing a working framework for analyzing fear appeals used in COVID-19 discourses as strategic, rhetorical utterances situated in ethical and political contexts. First, I develop a rhetorical reading of fear appeals by close-reading Aristotle’s philosophical treatment of fear appeals as a strategy (*Rhetoric*, 2.5.4; 2.5.14) that uses fear to inspire either courage or cowardice (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a6-7) in an effort to preserve a polity (*Politics*, 5.8.1308a5). Second, I situate fear appeals as emergent from two views of the COVID-19 pandemic—as a medical issue requiring medical interventions and as a security issue requiring militaristic responses. Finally, in terms of the rhetor-audience relationship, objects of fear, logic and telos of argumentation, and forms, I distinguish between rational fear appeals that develop from medical rhetorics and coercive fear appeals that come from militaristic rhetorics. I conclude the essay with a brief discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of a rhetorical conceptualization of fear appeals in communication research and practice.

### Fear Appeals as Situated Rhetorical Strategies

One of the most frequently cited definitions of “fear appeal” in the empirical literature on persuasion and social influence comes from Kim Witte’s Extended Parallel Processing Model (Stolow et al., 2020). Fear appeals are characterized as messages with two components in Witte’s (1994) EPPM: a threat component emphasizing the severity and susceptibility of a threat, and an efficacy component emphasizing the feasibility and effectiveness of a recommended behavior. While this definition is helpful in socio-psychological communication problems that aim to predict how fear appeals influence attitude or behavior change, it cannot account for rhetorical communication problems that investigate what situations motivate a rhetor to choose a specific fear appeal strategy. To detect these nuances, we must consider fear appeals as a variety of strategic utterances positioned in ethical and political contexts.

Aristotle developed a philosophical conceptualization of fear appeals as an ethically and politically situated rhetorical strategy. Aristotle addresses when fear can be skillfully employed as a technique of persuasion in his *Rhetoric*:

Fear is a painful emotion caused by an impression of imminent evil that causes destruction; for people do not fear all evil...but only if those can cause great pain and destruction, **and only if they appear to be imminent**. For people do not fear things that are not imminent; all people know that they will die, but if death is not imminent, they will not be afraid. (*Rhetoric*, 2.5.1)<sup>1</sup>

There appears to be two important features in Aristotle’s fear appeal strategy: 1) the characterization of an image (*φαντασία*) of a fear object (*τά φοβερά*) that causes pain or danger, and 2) the rhetorical attempt to make the image of the fear object appear to be imminent (*ἐγγύς*). Some objects, events, or situations do not arouse fear unless they are presented to be fearful. For example, going outside of one’s home during quarantine may not necessarily be a fearful situation in itself. But when one encounters a coffin in the middle of a road checkpoint with a placard that says “go home or go inside,” one can experience fear and anxiety (cf. Esconde, 2020). The

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<sup>1</sup> “ποῖα δὲ φοβοῦνται καὶ τίνας καὶ πῶς ἔχοντες, ᾧ δ’ ἔσται φανερόν. ἔστω δὴ ὁ φόβος λύπη τις ἢ ταραχὴ ἐκ φαντασίας μέλλοντος κακοῦ φθαρτικοῦ ἢ λυπηροῦ: οὐ γὰρ πάντα τὰ κακὰ φοβοῦνται...ἀλλ’ ὅσα λύπας μεγάλας ἢ φθοράς δύνανται, καὶ ταῦτα ἐὰν μὴ πόρρω ἀλλὰ σύνεγγυς φαίνηται ὥστε μέλλειν. τὰ γὰρ πόρρω σφόδρα οὐ φοβοῦνται: ἴσασι γὰρ πάντες ὅτι ἀποθανοῦνται, ἀλλ’ ὅτι οὐκ ἐγγύς, οὐδὲν φροντίζουσιν.” All Greek text in footnotes are from Ross, W. D. (Ed.) (1959). *Aristotelis: Ars Rhetorica*. Clarendon Press.

placement of the coffin and the placard's warning constitute a rhetorical attempt to construct the act of going out of one's house as a precedent to an imminent, fearful situation – death.

However, for a fear appeal to be effective, it must also demonstrate that the object of fear can be deterred. According to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, fear appeals must give audiences hope (*ἐλπίδα*) that they can be saved from the immediate threat described in the fear appeal:

[For a fear appeal to work], the hope of being saved [from the object of fear] needs to prevail amidst [the audience's] struggle with fear. For fear makes people deliberate, but no one deliberates about hopeless things. (*Rhetoric*, 2.5.14)<sup>2</sup>

Pfau (2007) also takes hope as an integral component of fear appeals. Drawing from Aristotle's positioning of courage (*ἀνδρεία*) as the mean between fear and confidence (NE, 1115a6-7),<sup>3</sup> Pfau (2007) argues that fear appeals should stimulate a sense of hope so that audiences can muster the courage to face the object of fear. The presence of hope, then, arguably helps audiences in avoiding the three vices Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115b24-1116a3) identified at the extreme ends of the fear-confidence spectrum: rashness (*θρασύς*), no sense of fear,<sup>4</sup> and cowardice (*δειλός*). An Aristotelean perspective of ethics requires the rhetor to design the fear appeal in such a way that it inspires courage.

This obligation applies to a rhetor-audience interaction within an institution-polity arrangement. According to Pfau (2007), fear appeals also serve a political function in maintaining the polity. Drawing on Aristotle's (*Politics*, 5.8.1308a25) argument that regimes can be preserved by putting them in the presence of what can destroy them, Pfau (2007) notes that fear appeals are used politically to preserve a republic and make the polity/community vigilant in protecting themselves from an imminent threat. Fear, then, can become a potential source of “moral energy” and political unity (Kapust, 2008). Using this framework, we can locate the use of COVID-19 fear appeals as an attempt to preserve the Filipino community and make them vigilant amidst the pandemic.

By positioning the concept of fear appeals in ethical and political contexts, we can further contextualize the rationale for the rhetor's choice of fear appeal method in (a) an ethical context grounded in considerations

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<sup>2</sup> “...ἀλλὰ δεῖ τινα ἐλπίδα ὑπεῖναι σωτηρίας, περὶ οὗ ἀγαπιῶσιν. σημεῖον δέ: ὁ γὰρ φόβος βουλευτικούς ποιεῖ, καίτοι οὐδεὶς βουλευέται περὶ τῶν ἀνελπίστων.”

<sup>3</sup> “... μεσότης ἐστὶ περὶ φόβου καὶ θάρρη...”

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle does not provide a name for this specific emotion (cf. Garver, 1982).

of virtue and (b) a political context grounded in considerations of preserving a polity. As a result, a rhetor's priorities toward such factors may drive them to employ either a logical or coercive fear appeal strategy. Thus, it is critical to determine the constraints that shape the exigencies and priorities that a rhetor considers when selecting a fear appeal strategy.

### Constructing the Pandemic as a Medical or Military Problem

Taking the view that fear appeals are a rhetor's response to situated exigencies requires identifying the rhetorical situations on which different COVID-19 rhetorics are constructed and legitimized. Bitzer's (1968) "materialist" view characterizes the rhetorical situation as the socio-economic, historical, or political conditions that call upon the rhetor to respond. However, to say that fear appeals are merely responding to the COVID-19 crisis *per se* fails to recognize an important consideration—how rhetors simultaneously perceive and construct the COVID-19 crisis symbolically.

Vatz (1973) argues that rather than viewing rhetorics as emerging from rhetorical situations, we should view situations as rhetorical in and of themselves. Although this essay does not aim to reconcile the Bitzer-Vatz debate, conceptualizing the "rhetorical situation" of COVID-19 as both constructing and constructed by rhetorics helps us view the pandemic as an ideologically-constructed phenomenon that shapes exigencies calling for certain rhetorics. We see this scheme in the weaponization of the "Hindutva" ideologies in Indian COVID-19 discourses to legitimize violence against Indian Muslims (Prasad, 2020), Trump's xenophobic framing of COVID-19 to legitimize racism against Asians, particularly the Chinese (Benjamin, 2021), and Duterte's war-like rhetoric to legitimize the securitization of the pandemic response (Arguelles, 2021; Hapal, 2021; Lasco, 2020). This implies that, although these rhetorical situations describe the same pandemic, the narratives about what the pandemic is and how it should be dealt with differ. It follows that the fear appeals arising from different rhetorical situations are also different. In both the scholarly and journalistic literature reviewed for this essay, two major rhetorical situations that shape the pandemic have been identified—the medical and the militaristic.

On the one hand, the medical rhetorical situation constructs COVID-19 as a medical issue that necessitates a medical-oriented response. Such a situation reflects the "scalpel" approach in responding to the pandemic (Mendoza, 2020). Most of the exigencies that arise from this rhetorical situation are calls to persuade people who are at risk of contracting COVID-19 to adopt recommended health behaviors. Therefore, the rhetorics that respond to the medical exigency are often rational, consisting of

informational and instructional messages that bridge knowledge, attitude, intention, and behavior gaps on proper health behaviors to avoid and/or mitigate COVID-19 at the individual or the community level. Fear appeals, being a persuasive strategy commonly used and studied in health communication (cf. Dillard et al., 2017; Tannenbaum et al., 2015; Witte & Allen, 2000) have also been used to address the same exigency.

On the other hand, the militaristic rhetorical situation constructs COVID-19 as a security threat that demands extraordinary security measures to be controlled (Hapal, 2021). Under this view, the pandemic is framed as a “war” against the “*pasaway*”—a word the administration has often used to describe violators of quarantine protocols (Hapal, 2021). Such militaristic rhetorics reflect the Philippine government’s “axe” approach in responding to the pandemic (cf. Mendoza, 2020). By incorporating a “medical populist” response that scapegoats the *pasaway* as the main enemy of the pandemic, militaristic rhetorics revert to similar rhetorics found in the bloody “war on drugs” to legitimize draconian measures against quarantine violators (Lasco, 2020; Robertson, 2020). Thus, militaristic exigencies for fear appeals call for the coercion of the *pasaway* so that they not only follow quarantine protocols but also acquiesce to draconian measures such as imprisonment or even death. However, because the purpose of coercion is to obstruct a person’s agency through grave threat or force, coercive fear appeals have the potential to become ethically problematic. Relying too heavily on coercion would result in what Simon (2020) refers to as a “parallel pandemic” of human rights and health—an epidemic that the UN (2020) cautions might enable narratives in which the people, i.e., the *pasaway*, become the threat rather than the virus.

### Distinguishing Rational and Coercive Rhetorics of Fear

To recap, this essay has demonstrated that 1) fear appeal strategies are situated in ethical and political contexts, and 2) despite dealing with the same pandemic, medical and militaristic rhetorical situations create different exigencies that call for different fear appeal strategies. Furthermore, such techniques are based on who gets to produce fear appeals, to whom the fear appeals should be addressed, and which threats should be employed to inspire fear. To distinguish the nuances in all of these strategic considerations, we may distinguish different rational and coercive fear appeals using a generic approach.

Although fear appeals are not necessarily “genres” in the traditional sense, this part of the essay takes a generic approach to exploring and exhausting the different rhetorical strategies in rational and coercive fear appeals as distinct social actions marked by distinct rhetor-audience relationships,

strategic choices of fear arousal, logics and *telos* of argumentation, and form (cf. Miller, 1984). The following table shows the results of this attempt:

**Table 1.** Generic Distinction of Rational and Coercive Fear Appeals as Rhetorical Actions

Generic Components	Fear Appeals as Social Action	
	Rational Fear Appeal	Coercive Fear Appeal
<i>Rhetor-audience relationship</i>	(technocrat; non-hostile) The technical expert(s) educating the risk society	(punitive; hostile) The authority disciplining the <i>pasaway</i>
<i>Object of Fear</i>	COVID-19	Imprisonment or death
<i>Logic of argumentation</i>	(If-then) “If you don’t practice recommended health behaviors, you are at more risk of contracting COVID-19”	(Either-or) “Either comply or be imprisoned/killed”
<i>Telos of argumentation</i>	Courage	Cowardice
<i>Form/medium</i>	Communication campaigns (posters, commercials, PSAs, etc.), medical advice, posts/reposts on social media, etc.	Speeches, symbols of punishment and death (coffin, the siren from the <i>Purge</i> to signal curfew, live streaming of quarantine violators being punished, etc.)

**A. The rhetor, audience, and the rhetor-audience relationship**

A distinction can be made in the construction of the rhetor, the audience, and the rhetor-audience relationship. Both rational and coercive fear appeals have different constructions of the rhetor’s credibility to administer fear appeals, indicating distinct *ethē* (ἦθη) between the (a) technocratic ethos of the health worker or medical society, whose credibility draws from expertise in medicine, and the (b) punitive ethos of the Philippine government, who have the legal credibility and authority to discipline and punish the *pasaway*.

This distinction allows us to distinguish between rational and coercive rhetor-audience relationships. On the one hand, the technocratic rhetor assumes the role of a knowledge source and creates fear appeals as a way to inform and educate audiences of the consequences of not following proper health behaviors. Taking a risk communication view, the technocratic rhetor becomes integral to educating the “risk society” (cf. Beck, 1992). The punitive rhetor, on the other hand, has a legally binding role as the executive and judicial authority over the *pasaway*. And as the *pasaway* is framed in the

militaristic rhetoric's narrative as the scapegoat of the pandemic (Hapal, 2021; Lasco, 2020), the relationship between the two becomes antagonistic compared to the more sympathetic nature of the technocrat-risk society relationship. Threats of rational fear appeals are often non-hostile given the nature of these rhetor-audience power relations, but threats of coercive fear appeals are generally hostile.

### ***B. Imminent threats, their motivations, and telos***

With hostility as one of our indicators of the rhetor's strategy of constructing fear appeals, it also follows that the object of fear will differ between rational and coercive fear appeals. As rational fear appeals are utterances in response to the medical technocrat's need to persuade the risk society to observe health practices, the object of fear is often COVID-19 itself. Therefore, rational fear appeals create an image of COVID-19 as an imminent threat to one's life if proper health measures are not followed. For example, in three social media ads produced by St. Luke's Medical Center, COVID-19 is (a) symbolized as a threat through pictures of COVID-19 patients in hospital beds who are either in critical condition or dead, and is (b) depicted as a consequence of not wearing masks ("I can't breathe" and "I don't want my face covered") and for not staying at home ("I don't want to be alone") (Madarang, 2021). Rational fear appeals from foreign sources occasionally trend on Philippine social media. Grady Memorial Hospital and Five Oaks Medical Group, for example, shared O'Shea's (2021) post, "A Story of Two Chest X-Rays," which compares chest x-rays of COVID-19 patients with and without vaccines and emphasizes the magnitude of COVID-19 effects for unvaccinated patients in order to convince audiences to get vaccinated.

On the other hand, coercive fear appeals often use either imprisonment or death as the object of fear. With COVID-19 framed as a security threat embodied by the *pasaway*, those who are labeled as *pasaway* are constructed as socio-health threats that need to be disciplined to control the pandemic (Hapal, 2021). It also follows that depending on how the rhetor characterizes the *pasaway*, the magnitude of the threat towards the *pasaway* also changes. Although the *pasaway* can be a catch-all term to describe quarantine violators in general, the *pasaway* takes on the form of what Hapal (2021) describes as an "empty signifier" that may refer to different groups from the general public or specific communities that express dissent towards the administration.

One of these groups who take on the signifier of *pasaway* are protestors who the Duterte administration associates with the Philippine political Left. For example, in a speech calling out both the political Left and the urban-poor rights group *Kadamay*, Duterte framed protestors calling for government assistance as quarantine violators and threatened to have anyone who also



plans to stage protests be shot by authorities (Tomacruz, 2020). In the speech, Duterte gave the following fear appeal:

My orders to the police, the military, and even the barangays are if there are troublemakers (protestors) and it comes to the occasion that you have to fight for your lives, **shoot them dead. Do you understand? Dead.** (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2020a)<sup>5</sup>

The same fear rhetoric can be found in President Duterte's threat against a group of medical workers who publicly appealed for an improved government response (Ranada, 2020). In the speech, Duterte gave the following fear appeal:

...next time, don't let me hear "revolution." My God, that is more dangerous than COVID. Eh if you **mount a revolution, you will give me the free ticket to stage a counterrevolution...don't shout for "revolution."** If you [want] revolution, then do it now. Try it. Let's kill everyone with COVID-19. Is that what you want? (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2020b)

The *pasaway* is also associated with vaccine-hesitant Filipinos. For example, Duterte responded to growing vaccine hesitancy by threatening imprisonment for those who refuse to get vaccinated (Ranada, 2021). In the speech, Duterte gives the following fear appeal:

[Those who refuse to get vaccinated] are so stubborn. Don't --- don't get me wrong. Our country is facing a crisis. There is a national emergency. **If you don't want to be vaccinated, I will have you arrested. I will stick the vaccine into your ass. M\*\*\*\*\* f\*\*\*\*\*.** We're already suffering and you're [making it worse]. (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2021)

In the three speeches, the degree of Duterte's threats varies depending on the version of the *pasaway*. His threats against critics are more severe (death) than those towards vaccine-hesitant people (imprisonment). It is clear from the preceding instances that the arguments are constructed in distinct logics, one demonstrating how certain behaviors might lead to

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<sup>5</sup> All direct quotes from Duterte's speeches that appear in this article have been translated to English.

contracting the virus and another forcing the audience to choose between halting particular behaviors or experiencing punishment or death.

### **C. Logic and Telos of Argumentation**

Pfau (2007) notes that some fear appeals appear in a dichotomous form—presenting a threat component and a contingency component, a definition similar to Witte’s (1997) threat and efficacy component. However, both do not acknowledge subtle variations in the logic of dichotomous fear appeals. For instance, the following messages entail different logical configurations:

1. “Not observing health practices (i.e., wearing facemasks, social distancing, getting vaccinated) puts you at more risk of contracting COVID-19” follows an “if-then” logic that explains how not following a recommended behavior makes a threat more imminent.
2. “Follow me or be imprisoned/killed” follows an “either-or” logic that makes the audience choose between complying or receiving punishment. There is no attempt to explain how the behavior deters the risk of contracting COVID-19.

An argument can be made that on one hand, rational fear appeals generally aim to make the audience courageous (*ἀνδρείοι*) in the face of the object of fear (COVID-19) by equipping them with the knowledge and self-efficacy to avoid and mitigate the virus. On the other hand, coercive fear appeals generally do not aim to instill the courage to deter a threat but instead disarm audiences with punitive power so that they are put in a position where they have no other choice but to comply or acquiesce. In Aristotelian terms, coercive fear appeals call for the audiences to become “cowards” (*δειλοί*) in the face of the fear object (imprisonment or death) outlined in threats made by the authority.

### **D. Form/Medium**

Since rational fear appeals are produced in the context of medical rhetorics, they are often communicated in health and risk communication channels (e.g., traditional and digital media channels of hospitals and/or medical groups) and media (e.g., posters and social media ads). They are also commonly found in social media discourses where private users repost or share content made by health professionals. In all of these cases, rational fear appeals draw from rhetorical proofs (*πίστεις*) such as medical evidence, the credibility of health workers, and the provocation of fear towards getting COVID-19.

Meanwhile, coercive fear appeals are produced in spaces where the Philippine government has more discursive control. This is most noticeable

in President Duterte's speeches addressed to the nation. Moreover, since the government arguably has more discursive control, there are instances where unconventional, non-linguistic forms of fear appeals are used. One example is the use of the siren sound from the dystopian thriller-action movie, *The Purge*, to signal the start of curfew in some localities – a move that reportedly caused residents to express fear and anxiety on social media (Malasig, 2020). A similar morbid strategy comparable to this is the use of coffins at checkpoints to scare people to return to their homes (Esconde, 2020). Such a rhetorical act cannot be done by rhetors who are not part of the government; power relations and dynamics give rhetors more access to an arsenal of fear appeal forms.

Given the diversity of possible forms that can be used to convey fear, we can also make an argument for “borderline” cases of fear appeals where the contingent behavior to avoid the threat is implied. For example, it can be argued that live-streaming punishments of quarantine violators, such as in the case of LGBTQ+ quarantine violators who were told to perform lewd acts while being live-streamed on Facebook (Rappler, 2020), is a form of fear appeal that acts as a warning to audiences of what can happen if they also violate quarantine protocols. Another example is the use of dog cages to lock arrested quarantine violators (Philstar, 2020). Read as a rhetorical artifact, dog cages become signifiers of an implied threat (i.e., being locked in the dog cage like an animal) that arouse fear among potential quarantine violators.

### Conceptual and Practical Implications

This essay developed rhetorical distinctions between (a) rational fear appeals situated in medical rhetorics that aim to promote health behaviors to avoid COVID-19 and (b) coercive fear appeals situated in militaristic rhetorics that aim to discipline and punish who the Philippine government labels as the *pasaway*. This distinction expands the concept of fear appeals as ethico-politically situated and generically distinct in terms of rhetor-audience relationships, threats used to arouse fear, logics of argumentation, and forms. Such distinction may help researchers in further exhausting a typology of fear appeals to explore quantitative or qualitative trends. However, these distinctions are not meant to be mutually exclusive. For example, in some variations of the coffin fear appeal, the coffin is often associated with the virus and not the authorities thus sharing both rational and coercive traits (cf. Cigara, 2020). Moreover, the distinctions in this essay should not be taken as generalizations as it does not aim to generalize trends and patterns across a population of fear appeals; this essay only aims to show the possibility and necessity of distinguishing fear appeals rhetorically.

As scholars have pointed out that fear appeals can have unintended negative effects such as the lack of uptake and/or skepticism of recommended health behaviors, distrust in authorities, stigmatization, ageism, and a plethora of potential ethical challenges (Biana & Joaquin, 2020; Guttman & Lev, 2021; Stolow et al., 2020), it should be clear from the discussion above that the use of coercive fear appeals is more ethically problematic as it positions audiences into situations where they are forced to comply or they will be punished. However, most criticisms of fear appeals have relied on the empirical definition that this essay seeks to expand. Because these empirical categories cannot be utilized to adequately evaluate fear appeals through rhetorical, ethical, and political lenses, such critiques risk conceptually combining fear appeals that treat the virus as the threat with fear appeals that treat people as the threat.

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