

# Masked Reactions: A Content Analysis of Reactions on Twitter to Masking Update by the Premier of Alberta

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## Abstract

This qualitative study was conducted to explore attitudes and reactions toward a tweet released by Danielle Smith on October 29th, 2022. The data was collected by creating a sample of the 100 most recent comments on the post. From there, the comments were coded to identify common themes and messages. Two sides emerged; those in support of Smith and those opposed. For those in support, four main subcategories emerged. For those opposed, six categories were developed. This study demonstrated that individuals were generally displeased with this announcement and the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic by Alberta's UCP government.

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## Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasing number of people turned to social media to gather information, share opinions, and understand the most recent updates and mandates in their country or province. In Alberta, there was no shortage of arguments about what our province should, or should not, do in relation to the everchanging mandates on social distancing, vaccines, and masks. We should be able to trust our elected officials to maintain sound decision-making and choose what is best for everyone in the province. That is not always the case, as those in power will sometimes use their position to sway public opinion or understanding toward what they believe is the best course of action.

Existing literature on the subject of governments and their management of the COVID-19 pandemic recognizes that "it is very important for governments to provide people with the confidence in their preparedness to address the pandemic; they need to ensure that they are providing accurate information and that people are convinced by the measures put in place"

(Kada, Chouikh, Mellouli, Prashad, Straus, & Fahim, 2022). The consistent back and forth between government officials and public health officials regarding best practices for mitigating the risk of transmission of COVID-19 discredits the accuracy of information, and does not convince the public that the measures in place are effective. In their research, Pérez-Curiel, Rúas-Araújo, and Rivas-de-Roca demonstrate that a lack of agreement between scientists or health experts and politicians shows a lack of consensus that is not easily overlooked by the population.

The problem does not only lie within the mixed messages sent by government and health officials, but also in the ways in which people chose to get information about COVID-19, its risks, and how to best manage them. The literature identifies that oftentimes, people "choose to get informed only through their peers on social networks rather than actively seeking news" (Pérez-Curiel, Rúas-Araújo, & Rivas-de-Roca, 2022). This is problematic as it narrows the scope of information received and creates a sort of confirmation bias. It also has the potential to "calibrate a person's

perceived level of concern about an imminent health risk” and once again narrow their understanding of the importance of these public health policies. Growing databases of research throughout the pandemic have shown time and time again that masking is an effective way to reduce the spread of COVID-19, but it is still an ongoing topic of debate for many people across Alberta specifically.

A tweet released by Danielle Smith, premier of Alberta, on October 29th reads:

“Our government will not permit any further masking mandates of children in Alberta’s K-12 education system. The detrimental effects of masking on the mental health, development, and education of children in classroom settings is well understood, and we must turn the page on what has been an extremely difficult time for children, along with their parents and teachers.”

This statement shows disregard for those exposed to COVID-19 on a daily basis in Alberta’s schools, and is directly contradictory to recommendations provided by health organizations. This content analysis is important as it will assist in understanding the experiences of those who have received contradicting information between government and health authority sources.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The sample of data used for this content analysis is the first 100 available comments, of a total of 3,174 comments, to a tweet published by Danielle Smith on October 29th, 2022 in relation to masking mandates in Alberta schools.

### **Sample Selection**

Twitter is a widely used social media platform, and was a source for much information regarding mandates and restrictions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The presence of politicians on social media creates a lot of discussion between supporters and opposers, and Danielle Smith’s platform was chosen given her recent selection as the premier of Alberta, as well as her polarizing presence in the province’s politics. This tweet, in particular, was chosen as it was the most recent on her platform in relation to the ongoing

COVID-19 pandemic, and the number of comments demonstrated that there was significant conversation occurring around this topic.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The purpose of this content analysis is to identify the attitudes of people, mostly Albertans, toward Danielle Smith’s management of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, some tweets that are not specifically related to COVID or the statement at hand were excluded. Given that this study was conducted using comments from a social media platform, some of those comments were made using only emojis. Those comments were included as it is relatively easy to understand their intentions.

### **Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis for this study is themes that are present in the 100 most recent comments on Danielle Smith’s tweet from October 29th, 2022 regarding her stance on masking in schools. After coding all comments, 15 were excluded for not being relevant to the content analysis, leaving 85 comments for analysis.

### **Setting and Materials**

The research took place both at the university of the researcher as well as the residence of the researcher. Materials needed for this content analysis include a laptop that has internet access in order to locate the tweet used. To gather the content, screenshots of comments were taken on the computer of the researcher and then emailed to their iPad for further coding and analysis.

### **Coding Procedure**

Each comment was individually processed and analyzed multiple times. Comments were first coded as either in support of Danielle Smith and her stance on masking in schools, or against Danielle Smith’s stance on mask mandates in schools. Once these codes were in place, the comments were analyzed again to identify any common themes between people in each group.

### **Results**

There were two clear sides established on how people felt towards Danielle Smith’s masking announcement on Twitter. There were those comments that were in

support of her and those that were against her. This breakdown is shown below in Figure 1.

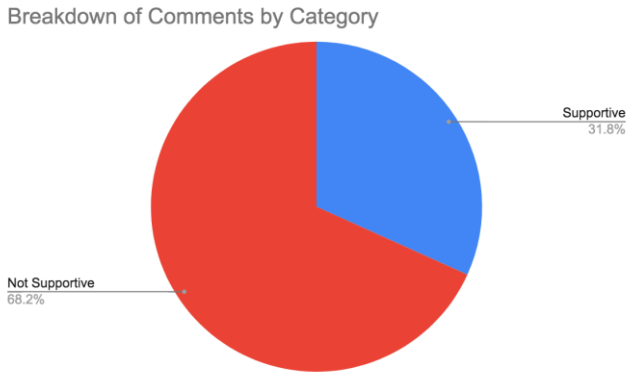


Figure 1. Breakdown of Comments by Category.

**Comments in Support of Danielle Smith**

Among those who were supportive of Danielle Smith, the main theme of support emerged. This was further divided into the subsections a) *thanks*, b) *envy*, c) *praise*, and d) *strength*.

**Support.** Support firstly refers to any comment that was in agreement with Smith’s decision to remove the possibility of reinstating mask mandates in schools. Given that these comments were the minority of the data gathered, it was hard to identify any other larger overarching themes. The subcategories were developed in conjunction with the analysis of what those people had said in their comments. A breakdown of comments per sub-category is provided in Figure 2.

*Thanks* refers to comments that were indicating their appreciation for Smith’s decision. This theme was present within 54.5% of comments within the support category. For example, one comment that fell within this subcategory stated “Thank you Danielle. You were the right choice for Alberta.”

*Envy* was indicated in some comments of individuals who were in support of this announcement. Oftentimes they were not from Alberta, and were envious of the decisions she had made for the province. This is seen in comments such as “Watching Alberta with envy from Ontario. Well done once again Danielle.”

*Praise* is indicated in comments that show admiration or strong approval of the decision. An example of this is a comment that begins with “[thumbs up emoticon]

Kudos to Smith! ... they do not have the right to impose on others.”

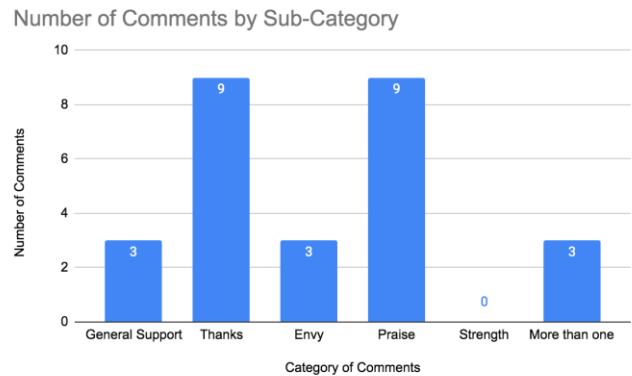


Figure 2. Number of Comments by Sub-Category

Finally, *strength* refers to any comments that depict themes of strength. Whether it be the word itself or an emoticon that symbolizes strength, these did not show up often, but were definitely there. An example of this would be a reply that starts with “... stay strong... stay the course!” From there, they continue to thank and offer support to Smith and her decision.

**Comments in Opposition to Danielle Smith**

Each comment in opposition to the tweet published by Danielle Smith was first categorized into the various emotions that were imminent in the tweet. These categories include *anger*, *frustration*, *disappointment*, *confusion*, or were classified as having no evident emotion. The most common emotion demonstrated in these comments was frustration, which appeared in 33 of 58 comments. The least frequent was confusion, which appeared just twice in the 58 comments. A breakdown of comments per sub-category is shown below in Figure 3.

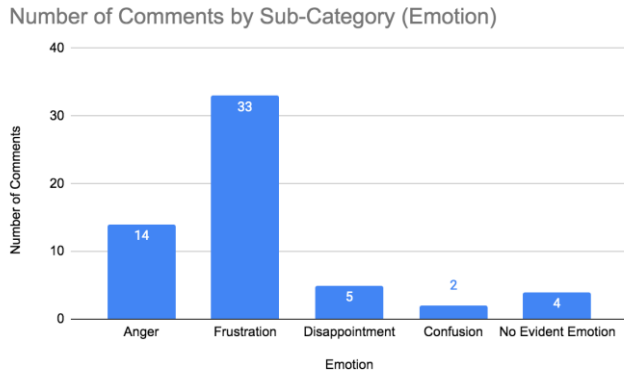


Figure 3. Number of Comments by Sub-Category (Emotion)

Each of the comments in opposition to Danielle Smith’s announcement was further analyzed for themes that were present within the tweet. This analysis revealed six main themes, which were 1) distrust, 2) science, 3) children, 4) experience, 5) freedom, and 6) sarcasm. The most prominent of these were science, distrust, and children, which were then further divided into subcategories. Examples of each of these categories, and their respective subcategories are represented in Table 1.

**Distrust.** Distrust refers to any comments in which the main message was a general sentiment of hesitation. This was the most common theme, and was present in 31% of all comments in opposition to Smith’s announcement. Within this broad category, two subcategories were identified as a) government and b) legal.

As a subcategory, *government* refers to comments in which people express concern over the operations or competency of the government. This accounts for the largest number of comments, with 14 total comments falling within this category. *Legal system* accounts for any comment that suggests general distrust of the operations of our courts. This subcategory accounted for only 7% of total comments included in this content analysis.

**Science.** Science refers to any comments made that were based on the more empirical outcomes of the decision to prevent masking in schools. This was the second most common theme, with 29% of all opposition comments in this category. Its respective subcategories are a) evidence, and b) medical.

*Evidence* is comments that are either asking for evidence to support the statements made within Danielle Smith’s original tweet, or are providing concrete evidence to disprove claims that she had made. *Medical* refers to comments that talk predominantly about the health or medical side of masking and COVID-19. These comments also account for various concerns over the long-term impacts of contracting COVID or the nature of where people get their medical information.

**Children.** The comments that fall within this category all make reference to the impacts that the removal of masking mandates has on children. Some comments within this category are more general, and some recount personal experiences. The subcategory under this is concern.

*Concern* refers to comments that express how this mandate might influence the children that are directly affected by it. Comments within this subcategory mention catching COVID, the death of a family member, or peer pressure around their choices to mask or not.

**Experience.** Experience refers to comments that make reference to people’s lived or hypothetical encounters with the removal of mask mandates in schools, including the experiences of students, teachers, or families of those in schools.

**Freedom.** Freedom refers to comments that make reference to Smith and the UCP’s care and concern over the freedoms of those within the province.

**Sarcasm.** Sarcasm refers to any comments that were made in an effort to poke fun at Smith or this policy.

1. Science	
a) Evidence	<p>“What evidence are you referring to? I am aware of several peer reviewed studies showing the negative impacts are very minor...”</p> <p>“There’s over 5000 dead [Albertans] and counting, Danielle. It’s a virus, you can’t wish it away.”</p>
b) Medical	<p>“The mental health impact of masking is exaggerated and overstated. The risk and negative of not masking has far outweighed any suggested detriment to mental health or</p>

	education.” “Most Albertans and Canadians take their medical advice from professionals not radio host rage farmers.”
2. Distrust	
a) Government	“There is no way that you, or anyone else is going to stop my child from wearing a mask to school. You and the rest of the UCP are dangerous for Alberta.”  “Alberta needs to step up and do something about Danielle Smith! Why are you all letting her speak for you?”
b) Legal	“Can someone explain to me how someone who was NOT elected by the majority of Albertans can all of a sudden make decrees that will detrimentally affect the whole province. Is this how democracy works in the 21st century. I’m really trying to understand how this works.”
3. Children	
a) Concern	“Ya know what’s traumatizing to children, [their] friends, parents, grandparents, family members dying.”  “Even if children want to voluntarily mask you’ve just caused a peer pressure issue among the students.”
4. Experience	“Have you even listened to the majority of TEACHERS AND PARENTS? You know. The ones dealing with this?”  “My children have missed 30% of their school year so far because of the public health disaster you are insisting we ignore...”
5. Freedom	“When Danielle shouted FREEDOM, she meant the freedom she’d have to prevent your health and safety.”
6. Sarcasm	“So you’re saying I don’t have the freedom to mask? You’re taking away my freedoms? Huh.”

Table 1. Sample Comments Opposing Danielle Smith

**Discussion**

The purpose of this content analysis was to evaluate attitudes of people on Twitter towards attitudes on COVID-19 prevention measures nearly three years into the pandemic. The source of data for this content analysis was the 100 most recent comments on a tweet published by Danielle Smith on October 29th, 2022 in relation to mask mandates in schools in Alberta. While there were a few individuals who supported this decision, the overwhelming majority were still in favour of reinstating mask mandates in schools. Of those who were in support of Smith, the four main categories in their comments were a) *thanks*, b) *envy*, c) *praise*, and d) *strength*. The comments in opposition were broken down into six main categories including 1) Distrust, 2) Science, 3) Children, 4) Experience, 5) Freedom, and 6) Sarcasm.

The results of this content analysis reveal that a majority of commenters on Smith’s own social media accounts were not in support of her decisions. The largest proportion of all comments were those expressing an element of frustration with the ways in which the pandemic has been handled. An overwhelming number of comments expressed their distrust, specifically with the government that Alberta currently has in place. This is followed closely by a large number of people asking for evidence regarding the claims made by Smith.

This imbalance in perspectives relates to the existing literature and the article by Kada et. al. (2022), in which they discuss the importance of providing accurate and convincing measures for citizens to follow. When governments are actively contradicting health officials, it does not create confidence in their ability to manage a province while navigating a global pandemic. This is also consistent with the findings of Pérez-Curiel et al. (2022), as the evidence displayed in this content analysis shows that inconsistencies between government and health officials are not easily overlooked or forgotten.

**Limitations and Directions**

This content analysis has several limitations. One of these limitations is that the sample size was limited to the 100 most recent or “top” comments on the tweet, while there were 3,174 comments at the time of data

collection. The small sample size has implications on external validity and impacts the generalizability of this study. Additionally, researcher bias in coding the data may have impacted the results of the study as well. The source for selecting the data was limited to one Twitter post, from one politician, on one specific day. All of these factors may have influenced the type of comments that were available on that post, and consequently, impacted the comments that were selected to complete this content analysis.

Acknowledging the limitations that were mentioned previously, following research done in this area should consider the following suggestions. Firstly, a larger or more diverse sample size should be used to promote generalizability of the findings. Second, when coding the data, it should be ensured that processes are in place to combat researcher bias. Additionally, it would be interesting to compare comments from various tweets, days, or politicians to compare what is being said in other areas of discussion around COVID-19 measures in Alberta.

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