

Distinguishing Rhetorics of Fear: Conceptual and Practical Implications in Distinguishing Fear Appeals from Medical vs. Militaristic COVID-19 Rhetorics in the Philippines

Juven Nino A. Villacastin

University of the Philippines Mindanao

ABSTRACT

In health and risk communication, fear appeals are defined as messages that arouse fear by depicting a relevant and significant threat to influence audiences in adopting recommended behaviors that deter such threat. However, such definition conflates coercive fear appeals like “get vaccinated or get imprisoned” with rational fear appeals like “get vaccinated to avoid severe COVID-19 symptoms.” As a result, this conflation obscures different fear appeal strategies unique to specific rhetorical contexts, namely in medical and militaristic COVID-19 rhetorics in the Philippines, thus creating a methodological gap in systematically categorizing which messages use fear appeals for promoting rational health behavior or for intimidating audiences to comply with authorities. In this paper, I argue that we need to distinguish the nuances that shape different fear appeal strategies in Filipino COVID-19 rhetorics. First, I offer a rhetorical conceptualization of fear appeals as ethically and politically situated utterances through close-reading Aristotle’s philosophical works on fear appeals. Second, I collect rhetorical artifacts of fear appeals from Filipino COVID-19 discourses by triangulating official sources (n=6), journalistic sources (n=14), and scholarly sources (n=5) and then analyze how fear appeal strategies emerge from medical and militaristic rhetorical situations. Third, I generically distinguish rational and coercive fear appeal strategies in terms of the rhetor-audience relationship, the threat used to arouse fear, the logic of argumentation, and the forms used. This paper ends with a discussion on conceptual and practical implications in distinguishing between rational and coercive fear appeals.

Keywords: COVID-19, COVID-19 rhetoric, fear appeals, rhetorical criticism, Aristotelian rhetoric