

## **Masks as part of our Novel Identity: Creation of Meaning within a Time of Global Pandemic**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since the time COVID19 made its appearance on an international level (March 2020), masks have become a personal and social identity tool. Nowadays (June 2021), we cannot still leave our house without wearing a mask. It really feels like the mask is now part of our face, covering its lower part, hiding our facial expressions. In this paper, we examine the place and use of masks as markers of personal and social identities, as well as social responsibility. More particularly, we observe the following three issues: a) the symbolic meaning of masks as an anthropological artifact, b) the dilemma of individual liberty balanced by social responsibility, produced through mask wearing, and c) the way we can create meaning through adaptation to a new “masked reality”.

In this article, based on personal experiences, observation and bibliographical research, we explore and reveal the symbolic meaning of masks. We make use of the social identity theory (SIT) that assumes that one part of the self-concept is defined by our belonging to social groups (Trepte, 2006). More particularly we are examining our identity's, personal and social, need to respond to the ‘obligation’ of mask wearing. We believe that finding or inventing meaning to the use of mask, can help us evolve and accept our new reality.

**Keywords:** masks, identity, responsibility, meaning creation, innovation.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Masks have suddenly become an '*object of desire*'. The meaning of the face masks is, of course, strongly related to the prevention of the contagion, and it is also becoming a compulsory accessory enforced by the laws of many countries (Al Jazeera, 2020). Indeed, governments require from citizens to wear face masks, to protect themselves and others.

The use of masks has put us into a certain struggle, over our identity, our reactions, our way of being, of exchanging, of communicating. A mask prevents the expression of a part of our identity, i.e., the main paralinguistic signals of non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, speech movements and other personal characteristics, prohibits our social identity to grow. Howard (2000) refers to the 'struggles over identities', which social inequalities, nationalisms, and social movements might bring forward. Identities, as fluid, multidimensional, personalized social constructions, reflect and reveal the structures of our everyday lives and the socio-cultural environment in which our lives are lived.

In this article the symbolic meaning of masks as an anthropological artifact is observed. The dilemma of individual liberty balanced by social responsibility, produced through mask wearing is examined, and new ways are offered to create meaning and be able to adapt to a new "masked reality". The focus on meaning of the mask in relation to its use, is the same process with all artifacts that create a further layer of the body (condoms, personal protective devices, underwear, religious clothing, etc.), producing a similar dialogical movement in the meaning of safety/unsafety.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

In this article the social identity theory (SIT) is applied that supports that one part of the self-concept is defined by our belonging to social groups (Trepte, 2006). Linking the identity and the social theory can establish a more fully integrated view and theory of the self (Stets & Burke, 2000). Then, self-perception theory is quite prominent, which refers to our own observation and understanding of our own self (attitudes, emotions), observing our behavior (Bem, 1972).

More particularly examining the need of our identity, personal and social, to respond to the 'obligation' of wearing a mask is discussed. Based on literature review, personal experiences and observation, the focus is on a) the symbolic meaning of masks as an anthropological artifact, b) the dilemma of individual liberty balanced by social responsibility while wearing a mask, and c) the need of meaning creation to be able to adapt to our new "masked reality".

Understanding the symbolic meaning of masks, throughout the years, we can better evolve and accept our new masked reality, our 'new normal'.

### 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

The research of Noyes *et al.* (2021), examines the challenge to face identification and emotion recognition in Western cultures. Tateo (2021) explores the way people make-meaning of the mask, analysing preferences toward different types of face masks people would wear in public. No research paper, to our Knowledge, has been yet written concerning the impacts of mask wearing on our personal and social identities, and how we can try to reverse the negative situation of mask wearing into something positive and acceptable.

We can find research papers, written before the current COVID19 pandemic, that examine the link between masks and identity. Pollock (1995) examines the meaning and symbolism of masks, and the social functions of masking ritual, through a semiotic perspective that treats masks as icons and indexes of identity. Roy and Ladwig (2015), examines identity and masks usage potential to support adolescent development and self awareness. Potts and Dedekorkut-Howes (2011), examines a hypothetical ‘glittering fake mask’ of the Gold Coast’s city in Australia identity.

Finally, most of the scientific articles written after the beginning of the COVID19 pandemic (March 2020), provide evidence on the use of face masks impeding the transmission of the coronavirus.

### 4 DUALITY OF PERSONAL AND SOCIETAL IDENTITIES

Our individuality notwithstanding, our identity must be regarded in relation to a group. It is not just a question of ‘who I think I am’ but also of ‘who I think I am as part of a society, a group, a family’ and then of ‘who the other part(s) of this society, group, family, consider that I am’. Hence, our social identity is how we see ourselves, and how the other sees us, as a part of the society: “Identities are thus strategic social constructions created through interaction, with social and material consequences” (Howard, 2000: p. 371).

Our social identity, based on the social identity theory, is in most cases inseparable from our personal identity. Individuals define their identities along both of these two dimensions, the social and the personal, since each one of us belongs to different social groups; but at the same time we have our personal characteristics that distinguishes us from others (Howard, 2000). We create our identity in the process of interacting with other people, and we actually construct our social identity in the process of exchanging, collaborating, and communicating. Our *social* identity differs from our *personal* identity, in terms of variables such as personality traits (Jenkins, 2014). We can say that our overall identity is constructed by our personal identity in accordance with multiple social identities, each of which is linked to different social groups, since an individual belongs to many different social identity groups (*ibid.*).

In fact, how we are, or better how we think we are, and how the other sees us, might not be the same. It is important that we know who we are and what we want in order to understand both our personal and social identity.

Finding a purpose in life can help the fulfilment of all our different identities (personal, social, or other). This is why discovering a purpose for the use of masks can ease its acceptance. Giving these objects a meaning, something like the idea that by wearing a mask we are saving humankind from extinction, automatically transforms each one of us in a superhero. We can easily surpass this difficult situation by adapting and innovating. Differently said, we can invent the conditions to help us easily accept, and overcome the difficulties of mask wearing, by being creative and open to solutions like the one mentioned above. Transforming this new identity tool, which is now part of our face, symbolically to a medal of honour for the people that wear it, can help people accept this 'strange' situation.

## **5 SYMBOLIC MEANING OF MASKS AS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARTIFACT: SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS OF HIDDEN MEANING(S)?**

Referring to the symbolic meaning of masks as an anthropological artifact, we should first of all think of how masks have always been an important anthropological object. We often hear about masked/fake people, as persons who do not reveal their true feelings and thoughts, which might also be a reason for not accepting wearing a mask. "Commonly, wearing a mask has been associated with the hiding of one's true self, such as in *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Man in the Iron Mask*. Yet, the masks we adopt and how we wear them also tell us something about who we are" (Kelley, 2020: p. 116). Nevertheless, if we think that through masks wearers can transform to another person, travel in another time, perform and incarnate another self, this reveals a different perception of mask wearing, giving new ideas to innovative and become creative. Thinking also about the sacred masks, used in rituals, during carnivals, in theatres, in private meetings and negotiations, we understand that masks can represent different symbolic values over time.

A mask can be seen like the chase to reveal, to try and to experience a different identity. Through play, we are able to take a role, to interpret, to become someone/something else. Changing our appearance, with the help of a mask, gives us more choices to explore our different identities. In this way, we can discover or rediscover ourselves and examine our social and personal identities. How others see me and how I see myself while wearing a mask have today become part of our identity (personal and social).

It is the perception of each of us, regarding mask's use and wearing, that can make a huge difference. For instance, we could be inspired by the ancient Graeco-Roman world for our communication with others during this pandemic, taking the example of theatrical masks. Ancient theatrical masks revealed emotion and feeling through the eyes and not just the mouth (Hiestand, 2020). We can use this 'idea' to our benefit, trying to find ways to communicate while wearing a mask. Then, why don't we also think about the practical use of masks in modern East Asia, where face masks are worn to combat urban pollution, to prevent allergies, or to provide privacy in densely populated East Asian cities? (Hiestand, 2020). It is true that this year's winter (October 2020- March 2021) there were no or very little incidence of normal flu (Lovett, 2020), because of mask wearing, among other things. During cold and

flu season at East Asian cities, someone with a cold is expected to wear a face mask in public, in the office, and at school (*Ibid.*).

Today, still in a state of emergency due to COVID-19, face masks have become the symbols of this pandemic, a semiotic device of meaning production. People have learned, or must learn, to include them in their everyday life routine, even after the immunity process via vaccinations (Siegrist, n.d.). This meaning will certainly change when and if masks become mandatory again (Tateo, 2021). Yet, at the time that this paper is written, we should actually see the positive aspects of wearing a mask, understanding that we protect ourselves and the others is like we ‘show our smile to the world’. Giving masks such a meaning can help us overcome every difficulty we might face while wearing it. Meaning-making of masks, making them important, triggering a dialogical relation between ordinary and extraordinary (Tateo & Marsico, 2019 cited in Tateo, 2021) can help our personal and social identities to grow, even while wearing a mask. “Understanding how people make meaning of their use is fundamental” (*Ibid.*). We can then try and find our own meaning, inspired by how others have responded to this need.

A mask impacts identity from the moment that people actively produce identity through their talk and everyday interaction. The interactionist literature on identity articulates the construction, negotiation, and communication of identity through language, both directly in interaction and discursively through various forms of media (McAdams, 1995). Media, among other things, can have a great impact on our resistance to mask wearing.

## **6 DILEMMA OF INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY BALANCED BY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: RESISTANCE TO AND REFUSAL OF MASK WEARING**

In this part we will refer to the dilemma of our individual liberty balanced by our social responsibility, on whether we agree or not to wear a mask. There are various reasons and conditions that can influence how we decide or not to wear a mask. Ferng *et al.* (2011: p. 19, cited in Tateo, 2021), examined some of the reasons that people do not accept to wear a mask: a) they feel uncomfortable; b) different perception of safety/unsafely; c) this would embarrass people to wear their masks outside. Nevertheless, it seems that most of us make meaning of the face masks, as objects related both to their self (personal identity) and to others (social identity) (Tateo, 2021). Apart from its safety function, sanitary mask becomes a sign of “confidence”, in interpersonal relationships (*idem*), as it prevents the contagion to the person wearing it and also protects the others (preventing the person wearing to spread the virus).

On the other hand, there are cases where Coronavirus might also be only a small part of some people’s everyday problems/dilemma, of whether to wear a mask or not. Kelley (2020: p. 116) describes his stem cell transplant on October 2019: ‘Initially I felt quite conspicuous wearing a mask in public. With time, however, I became more comfortable wearing the mask into stores, especially when I could go outside to avoid close contact while my wife made the purchase. After the federal government’s admonition to wear masks in public, to arrest the

*spread of COVID-19, I became even more relaxed wearing a mask in public. As one passer-by on a hiking trail called out, “Yo, Bro! Coronavirus. Good for you, Dude!” I thought, “If only COVID-19 was the biggest of my problems.”*

Then, it is interesting to ask ourselves whether we would most likely decide to actually wear a mask to protect ourselves or others. In Canada, seeing from the results of a research conducted by Linden & Savoie (2020), people are more willing to wear masks as a measure to protect others from COVID-19 rather than themselves. The fact that by wearing a mask I am protecting the world from extinction is a great source of meaning that can make people wear a mask. Furthermore, thinking about social identity, it is interesting to think about how people tend to evaluate positively those groups to which they belong and to discriminate against groups they perceive to pose a threat to their social identity (Howard, 2000). It would be then important to examine how people actually enter a social group, taking the example of a group supporting the mask wearing during the pandemic.

Speaking of groups, a major point to examine is the mask denials. There are actually many groups of mask deniers (Gillespie, 2021), since the beginning of this health crisis. Some people might have refused to wear masks often as a symbol of their rights and others still believe that coronavirus does not exist or that they are not in danger (*idem*). Conspiracy theories and fake news has been feeding the denial group for a long time (Romer & Jamieson, 2020).

However, the number of mask denials has reduced, since many of the ones that initially denied started understanding that COVID-19 really exists and it is not about any misinformation or fake news (Kefalaki & Karanicolas, 2020). Groups of mask denial reveal a part of our social ‘masked’ identity, an identity that does not accept the change or that does not trust its ability to accept, adapt to, and go out for solutions that would not put the entire society in great risk.

Linden & Savoie (2020) explain that nonmedical masks serve not to protect the wearer but rather others. While examining the decision to wear a mask from this optic, it becomes a function of collective interest that impacts and refers with our social identity. Ostrom (2000, p. 142) argues that a substantial proportion of the population is composed of “conditional co-operators”. These “conditional co-operators” act in the collective interest as long as they see a sufficient degree of reciprocation by others and would be willing to wear a mask to protect others so long as they observe a sufficient number of people within their group doing the same. This conditional acceptance to wear a mask also reveals that our social identity can many times gain ground to our personal identity, and for that reason we should never underestimate its importance (Linden & Savoie, 2020).

## **7 CREATE MEANING TO ADAPT TO OUR NEW “MASKED REALITY”**

Making meaning of masks might be indeed the way to deal with the ambivalence of human existence (Tateo, 2021). We can use the ‘expressive power of masks’ to communicate (see also Hiestand, 2020). There are different colours, shapes of masks, and even written messages

that can be marked on masks, showing our need to communicate and express ourselves. We can even create our own masks, revealing our creativity.

Creating meaning for the use of mask in order to adapt to our new “masked reality” might be considered an obligation for our times. Masks today are promoted in different forms and colours to cover various possible situations and meanings. Masks with different colours, decorated in different ways, can be used to express our creativity, our thoughts and our feelings. Speaking from a personal point of view, processing different coloured masks and wearing them, permits me to express my mood, my emotions, my preference for the day.

Having a lot of different masks, masks of many different colours, shapes and even with different expressions designed on them, can help our nonverbal communication. This might be a way to express our mood of the day. It would be like using emoticons (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) or like wearing an outfit of a certain colour that expresses how we feel. The aesthetisation of masks can also be compensatory: *‘[G]iven the loss of nonverbal facial cues. Like adding an emoji to a text message, my party mask sends a happy, joyous message that often opens positive, casual conversation: “I love your mask!” “Thanks, I really like the colours!” Interestingly, I recently misplaced the party mask after a short camping excursion and was without it for a few days. Even though I still had the black mask, I felt mild anxiety without the party mask, similar to what many of us experience when we’re without our phone for a few hours. Evidently, having both masks available represents a sense of safety and security for me as I continue to work out my identity and, of course, maintain fairly stringent health practices’.* (Kelley, 2020: p. 118)

Moreover, we can also remember that the aesthetisation of the face masks represents one of the most powerful cultural tools through which humans make sense of both positive and fearful events (Tateo, 2017, cited in Tateo, 2021). It is a long time ago that people first began to relate themselves to face masks as a semiotic layer; they make sense of it that at the moment represents at the same time part of the body and emergency artifact.

Kelley (2020) uses autoethnography to explore his mask-wearing journey as identity making, while wearing a mask after his stem cell transplant (October 2019). Wearing a mask became a new way of life to him, making basic communication with other people challenging, while mask wearing also stimulated internal adaptations of his personal identity. The mask itself became ‘a symbol of his identity journey’. One interesting aspect with this seven-month experience he had is that it occurred before the COVID-19 crisis and continued with this global virus arrival:

*...[B]eing forced into mask-wearing has provided a rare opportunity. Since the use of comedy and tragedy masks in ancient Greek theater, masks (literally and figuratively) have represented the emotional experience of individuals and their public personas (Tassi, 1993). In this regard, Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgic perspective encourages us to think of the presentation of self as performance. As Manning (2005) observed, “Each person, Goffman reminds us, is etymologically a mask” (p. 2).’* (Kelley, 2020: p. 116)

Then, even if wearing a mask prevents non-verbal communication, it is up to us to invent new modes of communication. As Kelley (2020: pp. 122-123) describes, *‘[M]asks restrict*

*expression of emotion, a key characteristic of what it means to be human. We dehumanize others, and ourselves, when our perception is that they, or we, only experience a limited range of emotion (Oelofsen, 2009).... Another form of dehumanization that I have experienced comes through invisibility. Invisibility has often taken the form of being unrecognizable’.*

Irrefutably, face masks have now a central role in our lives and will continue to do so even after the actual pandemic of COVID-19. They will become an object of ordinary life. Inventing a meaning for the use of this artifact and adapting it to our everyday life can help us accept this actual situation, as its correct use can save lives.

Lack of safe space results, once again, in pulling away, withdrawing, feeling small and protective. In sharp contrast, feeling safe results in standing in the great expanse, feeling small, but with a heightened awareness of personal worth and place. The opening quote from James Baldwin (1963) speaks to this, “Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within,” and he goes on, “I use the word ‘love’ here...in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.” As I’ve argued, elsewhere (Kelley, 2019, 2021), full love creates safe space for intimacy (discovery and connection) and personal transformation. My masked-identity trek has led me through a wilderness strewn with the seeming indifference of medical challenges and coronavirus quarantine; yet, love, a daring and growth producing love, has been hiding in the spaciousness of this quest. Masked and unmasked, may we all continue to live with such spaciousness—grateful and loving, generous with ourselves and others. (Kelley, 2020: p. 128)

## **8 CONCLUSION: Acceptance of Masks in OUR New Normal Reality**

Face masks have become and will continue to be an everyday accessory. Adapting to the actual situation and learning to communicate while wearing a mask is useful and we can even say necessary. It might seem difficult to interact, since interaction has a lot to do with the lower part of the face; nevertheless, we can find innovative solutions and communicate even with the mask on. Additionally, we should consider and accept the difficulties of wearing a mask, while a) breathing through a mask is more difficult than breathing without one, and b) there is a limitation of our smell while we wear a mask.

Nevertheless, we have already evolved to accept our ‘new normal’, and with the new knowledge we have acquired, we have found solutions to easily adapt. Actually, the mask is by itself a sign with its own positive meaning(s). A person who wears the mask, no matter if we are talking about a surgical mask or a tissue mask, transfers an important message: ‘look at me’, ‘I am protecting myself’, ‘I protect you and others’, ‘I care about me’, ‘I care about you’, ‘I follow the rules that were imposed on me’, ‘I respect the rules’, ‘I care about humans’, ‘I would like people to overcome this difficult time’, ‘I am here for you’, ‘we are together in this’, ‘together we can!’. Translating the fact that we wear a mask for a high cause, elevates the person who wears it to a ‘superhero’. This is an excellent meaning-making for the mask and the condition we actually face. During a pandemic, the mask should be



considered a badge of honour, indicating the important role that you are playing in protecting the health of others during a crisis. Virus protection masks offer an opportunity to replace a visage of fear with a public expression of strength as a community. Thus masks become pragmatic and expressive socio-cultural tools for societies and individuals to move forward in confidence (Hiestand, 2020).

So maybe we should consider mask wearing and the whole situation of epidemics, and exceptional conditions that our world will continue to experience, as an ‘identity to come’, an identity that is already here, our ‘masked identity’, our ‘new identity’. Accepting the current situation and trying to find ways to innovate, communicate, exchange, can certainly make things better. We cannot transform the world and the situations we actually face, but we can adjust our attitude towards these changes. We can stay open to innovative ideas, discussions, proposals that can offer solutions and try to find ways to adapt.

To conclude with, it could be worth to mention that, once again, no matter how difficult it is and how quickly this global pandemic has changed our everyday reality, with understanding, respect, and unconditional love, we can only go on, discover, evolve, and continue for something better.

Our new ‘masked identity’, giving a name to our ‘masked face’, is an identity to discover, an identity that we will all learn to live with, an identity to meet, know, accept, and to which we need to adapt. Finding ways to make this ‘masked identity’ a part of our everyday lives can clearly ameliorate the ‘dark’ situations we are actually experiencing.

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