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## Care in a College Pandemic: Masks as an Extension of the Self

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## Care in a College Pandemic: Masks as an Extension of the Self

### Cover Page Footnote

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Elizabeth Mac Kay

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## ABSTRACT

This visual ethnography project presents a collection of photographs depicting care and daily life in Geneseo during the COVID-19 pandemic. Student researchers discuss images they have captured in six collections: meaning and change in mask culture, creativity in celebrations and holidays, labor and precautions in essential work settings, and care for our physical, mental, and emotional health.

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## INTRODUCTION

Not too long ago I was standing in line at the grocery store, six feet apart from the person standing in front of me as I waited for my groceries to be scanned. It was the holiday season, and to get into the spirit of things I was wearing a polar bear mask, as at this time the COVID-19 pandemic raged on and masks were a required asset to enter public spaces. When it was my turn to step up to pay, the cashier looked at me for a moment before complimenting my mask. She scanned my items and proceeded to laugh, “It’s crazy how we’ve come to complimenting each other’s masks, huh?” I politely agreed and laughed along with the innocent comment. We exchanged a few more pleasantries and once our transaction was completed, I went on my way, content with having received a compliment on my mask choice. By the time I returned to campus, approximately a month following the transaction at the grocery store, I adopted that same style of compliment. I found myself complimenting others’ design choices for their masks, and in turn I received them. I always felt a surge of pride at the compliments, as if they were complimenting something inherent about me. I found this to be especially true on the college campus, where a variety of different designed masks were utilized by students to complement their outfits or display a fun design. Girls I had never met before would stop me with an “oh my gosh I love your mask!” as I walked around campus, and I would do the same.

While these incidents were simply casual experiences of daily life I overlooked at the time, upon closer reflection, I now realize the unique importance of such innocent remarks. It was the acknowledgement of what I term, *mask culture*, that the cashier and the various girls across campus unknowingly participated in. This mask culture is a form of

care in which people engage in masking practices and masking behaviors that perpetuate the safety of themselves and others amidst the pandemic. I argue here that mask culture has evolved from initial medicinal practices into an incorporation and extension of the self. Likened to clothes or a smile, masks have become synonymous by many as a way to extend their inner personality to an outward expression. In this study I analyze how masks are understood and utilized as an extension of the self, and how said extension is a form of self-expression. Based on my findings, I will focus on two expressions of the body: masks as a substitute for the smile, and the relation between masks and clothing choice.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The usage of masks as an extension of the self takes place within the context of care amidst a global pandemic. In order to understand this application of mask culture, we must first ask ourselves—what, in this sense, is “care?” According to Rapport (2018), care is a “particular kind of social framework or environment that endeavors to give an appropriate proportionality to autonomy and inclusion” (p. 250). In the context of his article, this enactment of care exists in a formal capacity (i.e., formal institutions of care systems) and is broken down into four different interconnected subsections proposed by Tronto (as cited in Rapport, 2018): caring about, caring for, giving care, and evaluating care (p. 253). While similar in essence in that each level seeks to ensure the well-being of others, the differences arise in the directionality and focus on the care, with the first two subsections more so oriented towards partnership while the latter two are more related to institutional care. Regardless, at the basis of all levels of care is the individual self, and all care is enacted based on one’s individual autonomy interacting with the public sphere and expectations (Rapport, 2018). In such a sense, Rapport’s idea of “care” is of an environment that promotes well-being for others while maintaining individual autonomy. I understand this to indicate individual choices of each person within the environment should contribute to the overall well-being of others. Referencing Rapport’s work, I refer to “care” as such: the culmination of individual action that furthers or promotes the overall well-being of the community. In the context of care on a college campus, the “overall well-being” pertains to the physical, social, mental, or emotional health and well-being of the members of the college community, be they faculty, staff, students, or community members.

Mask culture, therefore, is a particular manifestation of care in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This involves the utilization of masks for both medicinal and social purposes, pertaining to the various forms of “overall well-being.” In this study, masks will be perceived in two different ways as the extension of the self. By “extension of the self” I refer to modes of expression as outward signs on the body, as utilized by the smile to portray nonverbal communication and articles of clothing or fashion to portray attitudes or ideas of social belonging. First, masks will be perceived as a substitution for the smile, a unique manifestation of inherent personality. In a study conducted on Russia-China border crossing, in which smiling was not permitted, the lack of a smile seemed to indicate a performance by Russian border security to indicate the seriousness

of crossing from one realm into another (Humphrey, 2018). In this sense, a smile is attributed to performative action to indicate the feeling within a particular social context. The idea of a smile plays into modern ideas of polite etiquette through semiotics. Based off approaches such as Brown and Levison's (1987) "politeness theory," smiling can be interpreted as "a part of repertoires of behavior, an accompaniment to other linguistic and non-verbal pragmatics, such as turn-taking, interruption, avoidance of humiliation, maintenance of personal distance, and so forth" (Humphrey, 2018). The nonverbal associations of a smile within a conversation possess significant semiotic control. Therefore, the loss of said smile relinquishes an aspect of control over the conversation one would normally hold non-verbally, and thus forces it into verbal queues. I propose that masks are another way to regain a sense of control over interactions. While not necessarily in the sense of non-verbal queues in the formation of a smile, but rather, in the expression of self that is prevalent within a smile.

Secondly, masks will be perceived as an extension of self as they relate to clothing choice. According to a study on associations of dress between Norwegian teenage girls and adult women, clothing choices were directly associated with body expression and associations of age and maturity (Klepp & Storm-Mathisen, 2005). As such, the choice of clothes not only became a symbol important to the "ideal body" image, but also to the avoidance of social embarrassment and anxiety (Klepp & Storm-Mathisen, 2005, p. 337). In such a sense, outfit choice is an indication of more than simple desire but also implicit social constructions. With the addition of masks as an essential item, I argue that they have become an article of clothing to be taken into consideration. As such, consideration of display of outfit choice plays into the concept of mask culture we see today.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The focus of this study is the analysis of mask culture expression as seen on a college campus. SUNY Geneseo, the focus college, is a public liberal arts college located in Western New York, the United States of America. Founded in 1871, it follows along the core values of learning, creativity, inclusivity, civic responsibility, and sustainability, per the SUNY Geneseo mission statement that combines rigorous academic and social responsibility (SUNY Geneseo, n.d.-b). As a socially responsible community that seeks to "inspire students to be socially responsible and globally aware citizens who are prepared for an enriched life and success in the world," the student body largely involve themselves in nationwide social movements and adherence to COVID-19 guidelines (SUNY Geneseo, n.d.-b). The college services undergraduates and select graduate programs for an average student age between 18 and 22. With a gender disparity difference of male to female of 60–40, the majority of the student body is female, yet, this is on par with the National Gender ratio for public universities (College Factual, n.d.). Over 90% of said student body comes from within New York State (College Factual, n.d.). While this could be owing to the public nature of the college, it nonetheless falls below the national average on geographic diversity. In terms of racial diversity, the college again falls within the average for the nation, leaning more towards the "less diverse" side of the scale with a demographic makeup of approximately 75% White students. The remainder of the

population consists of 7.5% Latino or Hispanic students, with similar levels for Asian students (College Factual, n.d.).

In terms of restrictions imposed by the college in relation to COVID-19, the college adheres to mandates as imposed by the state and SUNY school system (State Universities of New York). Based on these mandates, SUNY has imposed a three-pronged approach to maintain safe and open campuses that includes SUNY-wide testing, data transparency (release results of tests and keep students and SUNY informed of rates), and uniform enforcement and regulation (SUNY, 2020). The SUNY chancellor imposed specific guidelines in relation to how transgressions regarding policies should be handled, including transgressions such as a failure to get tested, failure to quarantine, or failure to adhere to mask mandates, with certain issues resulting in expulsion from the college (SUNY, 2020). SUNY Geneseo has adopted these same mandates as imposed by SUNY. Students must engage in a series of weekly pooled-testing procedures, with mandatory quarantine or isolation should the pooled-test session come back positive (SUNY Geneseo, 2020). Visitation policies are strictly prohibited and monitored on campus, and students are not to engage in large gatherings unless fully vaccinated and pre-approved by the college (SUNY Geneseo, n.d.-a). Based on college policies, masks must be worn by all participating members of the community in both indoor and outdoor settings, with the exception of their private residence, eating or drinking, or if they are by themselves (SUNY Geneseo, 2020).

## RESEARCH METHODS

This ethnographic study primarily utilizes participant observation and interviewing. An ethnographic study is, in general terms, the observation and gathering of data for critical analysis. According to Blommaert and Jie (2010), ethnography is often misunderstood as a simple methodology and description of collecting and describing data. They push back against this assumption by asserting that ethnography is much more than simple data collection and description and involves a wealth of analysis in the realms of language, communication, and an understanding of how knowledge is formed (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). Based on their holistic definition of an ethnography, this study will utilize ethnographic methods to understand mask culture in the ways individuals utilize masks as extensions of themselves. By engaging in participant observation (the observation of individuals to determine particular behaviors or habits) and utilizing fieldnotes (the documentation of experiences based on participant observation), I observed students within the SUNY Geneseo campus and the ways in which they engaged in methods of care. My particular focus was on masking behavior and the different types of mask designs students wore. Photography was another key part of this study, as I collected photographs of students and their masks to document the type of masking behaviors they practiced. These photographs compliment findings revealed through various student interviews. The data provided showcases information from 5 separate interview sessions with different individuals and was synthesized throughout the data analysis process. Through the data analysis process, a series of 13 interviews were analyzed and key information and trends were selected. The five interviews I refer to in this study represent the general

trends I witnessed throughout a majority of the interviews and observations, which seek to provide a holistic view of the ways students view masks as an extension of the self.

## FINDINGS

By wearing face coverings, students are participating in a mask culture of care that utilizes masks to promote the well-being of themselves and their community. This usage of masks extends beyond medicinal purposes and into the realm of expression. Through a series of interviews, students associated the usage of uniquely designed masks as an extension of their body. In particular, the usage of masks as a substitution for the smile is a primary way in which the students viewed masks as an extension of themselves. When prompted about why people may opt to wear masks with designs as opposed to generic surgical masks, L, an undergraduate student at SUNY Geneseo, comments:

I think [wearing those types of masks] just like not describe themselves but like you can't like see your smile and for me at least like my smile is a big part of like who I am so like some people I know like Anna on TikTok I love her she has like the white mask with the uhm yellow smiley faces and like that just makes me feel like she's a happy person.



Figure 1: TikToker, Anna Sitar (Sitar, 2021)

This comment presents a unique relationship between the ideas of identity and self-expression. In this case, the student is presenting a disconnect between the two commonly associated ideas of self-expression and identity. By insinuating that masks do not “describe themselves” (i.e., personality expression), but going on to indicate a smile as being “big part of like who I am,” she presents a smile as an inherent aspect of her personality with self-expression being more so a representative choice. However, she goes on further to emphasize her favorite TikToker (i.e., a social media personality associated with the video-sharing phone app TikTok) as wearing a mask that describes her inherent personality as a “happy person” (mask pictured in *Figure 1*). In this case, her comments are contradictory in nature. Is the smile not a way in which she expresses her inherent personality? To add to this, the masks as a substitution for the smile would equate with expression of inherent personality. Another student, V, emphasizes this relation between the smile and expression of personality. V regards this relationship as much more directional, with a smile being an important way to portray one’s inherently unique personality, and mask design choices as being a substitute for the smile.

I mean I know for me it [a mask with designs on it] represents my personality a little bit more [than generic surgical masks] and it—you know a smile’s something we can’t show any more and so I feel like your smile is a big indicator of your personality you know how much you smile how- you know if you smile at strangers if you don’t whatever and so I feel like you know as much as you know...your smile is what makes you—like it’s something personal to you it’s identifying to you um I can probably be identified off my smile alone and I think a lot of people could.

In this way V both agrees with and negates a smile serving as an expression of personality. On one hand, V describes the smile as a “big indicator of your personality” and how wearing different masks “represents my personality.” While on the other hand, she understands a smile as something deeper and more meaningful than a simple personality expression by indicating that “your smile is what makes you—like it’s something personal to you.” In this way V is highlighting the unique role designed masks play as an extension of ourselves. By substituting masks for the smile, she essentially raises the usage of masks to the purpose of displaying inherent personality, a role otherwise taken on by the presence of a smile.

Like ideas of the mask as representative of the smile, students understand masks in relation to clothing choice. According to R, another student attending the college, clothing choice can be equated to a form of communication, similar to the ways in which a smile is understood. “I think [mask designs] might just be part of a fashion statement. Umm, that’s just one way to show what you would say without showing your mouth. It’s kinda like reading lips, I guess in a way.” By referring to masks as a “fashion statement” then further associating them with reading lips, R creates a linked identity between clothing and forms of communication. These forms of nonverbal communication are similar to the smile, in that they express something about the individual without overt explanation.



This association of masks with communication through clothes is emphasized by the level of consideration placed into selecting masks based on outfit choices.

I usually like darker colors and then like the patterns are like camo or like black and grey, just the neutral patterns—just so it matches my outfit. My mask has to match my outfit.

This concern over masks matching outfit choice speaks to the way in which individuals such as L desire to be perceived. Students revealed that one of the most popular choices for mask designs were neutral or black colors, to ensure they matched with their outfits. *Figure 2* depicts a student wearing a black mask. Further in the interview, L continues:

...I do kind of like at least to me if someone's mask matches their outfit, it like tells me that they care about their appearance or like uhm just about the way they are around people just because you can't really get to know people at these current times so like seeing a bright colored mask like in my head might make someone feel happy, but I don't know, that's probably just me.

Here, she places emphasis on masks that match a person's outfit, in that it portrays certain aspects about the person such as their care for appearance or even how they interact



*Figure 2: Student wearing a black mask. Photograph:  
Elizabeth Mac Kay*

with others. Under this assumption, L insinuates that individuals who wear brightly colored or fun designed masks may be an indication of their care for others. Other interviewees such as student S indicate that this emphasis on clothing is more for aesthetic appeal of each individual person, and what they see as “cute.”

Umm, I think it's [masks with designs or logos] cute, y'know I think they've kind of become an extension of our accessories, kind of like a scrunchie, so I think it's just fun to customize them, or have little different designs.



*Figure 3: Mask Designs. Photograph: Iversen*

Still, another student disconnects this expression of clothing with the expression of personality. When asked about how she utilizes masks as a form of self-expression, she states in a quippy exchange how matching it with the outfit is simply too much effort.

Z: I mean, I pick out the mask patterns that I like. I just don't really match them with my clothing... That's more effort than I put into anything.

In this brief exchange the interviewee, Z, insinuates that while she selects mask designs based on what she herself likes, she does not make the next step to match with her outfits. Rather, her mask choice involves her likes and dislikes, and in such a way, this is a type of personality expression. *Figure 3* displays masks with designs, not those commonly associated with “matching everything.” If this is so, what then does this lack of usage of designed masks indicate about a person? Does this indicate that individuals who opt not to wear masks with designs on them are less expressive?

This is hardly the case. There could be a wealth of reasons why individuals opt to not wear a mask with designs on them. The lack of a design mask does not indicate a lack of

personality, just as much as the presence of a design mask does not indicate an overabundance of personality. As with any way of expression, they are simple choices. L comments on this usage of masks on the SUNY Geneseo campus, and points out a common reason behind certain mask usage patterns.

But I think like walking around campus in Geneseo I see more like the athletes wear the medical ones and then more like everyone else wearing like patterns or just something to like help describe themselves in a way. Uhm but I will say like last semester I was in person for a class like wearing a normal mask was so difficult like I had to wear the medical ones because they're much more breathable so I think once classes like start and if people have issues like breathing when walking up the hill and sitting in class and then walking back down I think medical masks will probably be more popular.

Mask design choice, in this case, has to do with both personality and physical comfort. This connection between the two creates a field of uncertainty for mask choice—should you choose self-expression or comfort? According to many students, it is comfort that they look for the most in a mask. When asked what mask is their favorite and why, they generally answered in one of two ways, or both. First, they emphasized the color of the mask, be it neutral, black, or a dull camo, with statements that the mask matched their outfits or, as V puts it, “vibes with [her] personality.” Secondly, they emphasized the comfort of the mask, including material and size of the mask.

## DISCUSSION

Mask culture has become a salient aspect of the campus community. Through considerations of care for the community in mask usage, students have found ways to incorporate ideas of the self within mask utilization. In essence, they have extended mask culture from simple medicinal purposes to an extension of the self. Utilizing masks as an extension of the self is accomplished through two primary associations: the association of masks to the smile and the association of masks to clothing choice.

The smile is an expression of inherent personality, and through association, the mask is depicted similarly. The usage of smiling provides various forms of nonverbal communication. A half smile can indicate a silent hello. A wide smile can indicate happiness. No smile can indicate a state of neutrality. As such, these various identities can be communicated through the usage of a smile, and in such a way, the smile can be utilized as an extension of the self. Based on what you wish to portray, your smile outwardly expresses your feelings. However, with these new considerations for care in the community, mask usage has become a necessity and has inherently cut off that form of bodily communication. As a result, students have had to implement new forms of bodily expression in exchange for the smile. This has been negotiated with the implementation of mask design. Through different mask designs (i.e., dark color, light color, floral print, plaid, tie-dye, etc.) students can communicate an aspect of themselves to others in place of the smile. Take, for example, a student who smiles often. This can be attributed as a personality trait of theirs, or a form of expression often seen. If you ask other students to describe

them, they may use descriptions such as “happy,” “kind,” or “always has a smile on their face.” The smile has become an inherent part of their personality. Now, take this same student in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The smile can no longer be seen. In place, said student may wear a brightly colored mask, or a mask with smiley faces on it to portray that aspect of themselves that has been kept hidden. In this way, people’s identities are contested and created through the usage of masks.

Of course, this is neither meant to insinuate that the same smiley student is forced to wear certain masks to portray their personality, nor are they restricted in the types of masks they can use. This is where the second utilization of masks as an extension of the self-manifests. In this way, masks are associated with clothing choices, with an emphasis on the mask matching clothes or being comfortable. This is in relation to clothing choice in general, in which individuals tend to select clothes based on levels of social acceptance (i.e., fashion) (Klepp & Storm-Mathisen, 2005). Clothing style is associated with social acceptance and maturity, and thus, has evolved into an important consideration in everyday life. This emphasis on clothing choices has permeated into a unique blend of societal expectations and self-expression, with modes of self-expression through clothing tending to fall within societal expectations. Masks have become an associated article of clothing for the modern student in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, students place a heavy emphasis on mask designs that can be incorporated into their clothing style to maintain social significance or relevance. This falls within the realm of social expectations of style and personal expression of style.

## CONCLUSION

Mask culture has been incorporated into forms of care in college during the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of mask expression. Two primary ways in which this is understood by students is through masks as a substitution for smiling and masks as an extension of clothing style. Smiling and clothes are both expressions of the self in the sense that it portrays our inner personality and our desire to adhere to social standards for fashion. In this sense, are masks essentially a performative action that we engage in to portray our personality? Or are they simply based on comfort? Results from this study indicate that it could be a mix of both. Students reveal the unique dichotomy between them, in which they understand masks to have meanings of self-expression, while also making their selection of masks based on levels of comfort or fashion. Further analysis may look into the underlying logic behind this mode of self-expression, and the role comfort plays in the selection of masks.

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